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"George Bush Doesn't Care about Black People": Hip Hop, Public Discourse and Black Politics in the Early 21st Century

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The University of Southern Mississippi

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by

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Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Studies Office
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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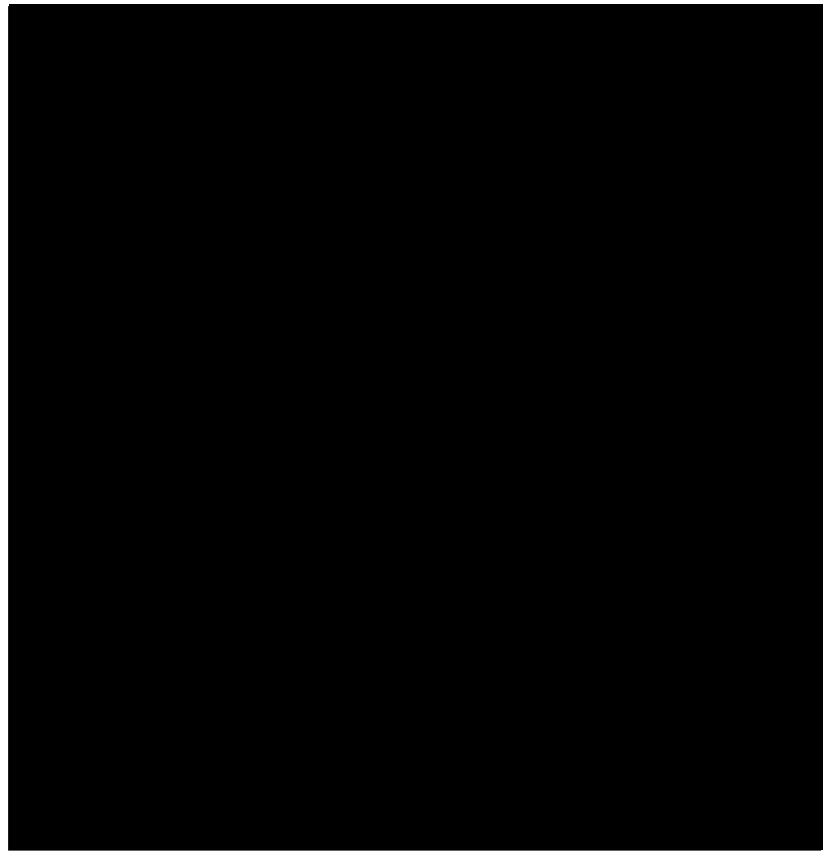

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ABSTRACT

"GEORGE BUSH DOESN'T CARE ABOUT BLACK PEOPLE":

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Recently, more scholars are examining hip hop as a powerful cultural, communicative force, yet hip hop's political orientation goes unnoticed. This study highlights the politics found in hip hop culture and in rap music since 2000 by exploring hip hop as a social movement. This study utilizes a critical, cultural approach by applying ideological case study and textual analyses methods. Song lyrics, activist efforts and black politics prove the political orientation of hip hop culture, which revealed that rap music in general is limited by capitalistic, hegemonic restraints juxtaposed to rappers serving as the legitimate voice of the marginalized and as victims of the cultural production of negative stereotypes. The study concludes that hip hop as a social movement has revolutionary potential but has not reached its zenith as a movement because of its multiple shortcomings, including: a) problematic issues of contradiction such as materialism, capitalism and the politics of racism and classism, b) a lack of a movement-specific ideology shared by minority groups, and c) the lack of a single leader unrelated to entertainment as the representative "voice" of marginalized citizens to advocate for national policy issues and national reform.

DEDICATION

First, I wish to thank my Heavenly Father, the creator of all things. Praise Him!

This dissertation is dedicated to the memories of my grandfather who raised me, the late Bishop Hosley Lynch, a gentle giant who taught me unconditional love and appreciation for the sunrise. Also, I dedicate this project to my grandmothers, the late Bessie Lynch and Minnie Mae Reed and my late father H. C. Reed. Special dedication goes to my mother, Hosley Mae Lynch Bratcher, my stepdad Wade and to my siblings Josephine, Osie, Steve, Cecelia and Priscilla. Much love goes to my children Kimberly and Sterling, for bringing to me more joy than I can ever explain in words, and to my beautiful granddaughters Davan and Damani, my lifeline and reasons for not giving up when times were tough during this process. This Ph.D serves as a reminder for you to strive for greatness in life. To my love Willie Martin, thank you for your unwavering love and support. You are proof that real love exists and I'm blessed to have you in my life. I LOVE YOU! Thanks Cecelia, for loving me just as I am and to my nephew Jonathan for your inspiration. Monica Stone Turner, you are my rock. Melissa Medley, words can't describe your wonderful presence in my life. Viloice Posey, you are my sister. Thanks to my spiritual advisors Pastor Jerry Malone and Rev. Dr. Robert E. Fox for your prayers. Drs. Cheryl Jenkins and Glenn "Pete" Smith, you inspired me to pursue this endeavor. Thanks Traci Hayes for your friendship, encouragement and research assistance. "We did it!" Dr. Jerlen Nelson, my fellow classmate and friend who made this journey with me. Much love to my precious friends: Mattie Stoddard, John and Sherryln Adams, Byron McCauley, Julie Trotter, Latrice Newsom and too many others to name. God is good!

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Special thanks to Dr. Freddie G. Howell for inspiring the dream. Heartfelt thanks to Dr. David Davies for your special friendship, your guidance and intellectual and emotional support. To the late Dr. Arthur J. Kaul, whose life ended before the completion of this project, for giving me my first opportunity to teach and for serving as a shining example of the type of scholar and passionate teacher I desire to become. You would be proud. I miss you. Thanks to the School of Mass Communication and Journalism faculty and staff for your support. Finally, I acknowledge my ancestors and many other men and women who blazed trails to create this opportunity for me to realize my American dream.

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INTRODUCTION

Obscene Language and the Politics of Blackness in Hip Hop Culture

"I am not my hair / I am not this skin / I am not your expectations (no) /
I am not my hair / I am not this skin / I am the soul that lives within..."

- Hip hop artist India.Arie (2006)

When Grammy award-winning hip hop artist India.Arie wrote the poignantly inspiring lyrics to her 2006 hit song "I Am Not My Hair," the twenty-something year-old black woman probably had no idea that the very thing she sang about would sooner than later become part of a national discussion on race, viscous language and hip hop culture. When a category 5 hurricane named Katrina ravaged New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast in August 2005, the disaster would give focus to race in this country. The national media were comfortable calling black American citizens "refugees" instead of "evacuees," reminding African Americans and other minorities that in their own country they are not recognized as citizens. When for the first time in America's history an African-American man secured the nomination as the 2008 presidential nominee for the Democratic Party, race was once again a topic that dominated discussions in popular and black culture. The politics of race, blackness and representation in opposition to the ideology of the dominant culture is being expressed in political rap music and through grassroots political activity in hip hop culture.

Hip hop is a culture ripe for examination from both black and popular culture perspectives. One of the critical questions around hip hop is its appeal to youth audiences globally. That is why the current study seeks to critically analyze contemporary social and political issues in black popular culture and its significance to the youth generation. In 2007, national syndicated talk show host Don Imus, in reference to the Rutgers University Women's basketball team, called the players "nappy-headed hos" on his Imus in the Morning radio show (MediaMatters, April 2007, n.p.). This comment created a firestorm of controversy regarding the use of disparaging language to describe African American women. The team comprised of eight African-American and two Caucasian players would become part of the national debate around those offensive remarks (MediaMatters, 2007, n.p.). Further, the controversy would spark Civil Rights activists like the Reverend Al Sharpton to call for Imus's resignation. After a series of apologies from Imus, MSNBC dropped the televised simulcast of the Don Imus show. Shortly afterwards, CBS radio executives fired Imus for his offensive remarks. According to public intellectual and cultural critic Dr. Michael Eric Dyson (2007), this isn't the first time that Imus or his colleagues on his show have "overstepped the boundaries of ethical sensitivity in speaking crudely of black folk," referring to respected PBS anchor Gwen Ifill as a "cleaning lady" and The New York Times' sports columnist William Rhoden as a "quota hire" (p. 126). Both these journalists are black.

The debate about race and sexist language caused such media frenzy that The Oprah Winfrey Show dedicated three episodes to examining racist remarks and widely used disparaging language in hip hop culture during her April 12, April 16 and April 17, 2007 broadcasts. Each episode was made up entirely of African-American guests. The

initial broadcast on April 12, titled "Rutgers Players Speak Out," dealt with the problematic issue of Don Imus naming the women "nappy-headed hos," which is the slang term for whores. The program also showcased how the Rutgers University women's basketball team overcame adversity by making it to the NCAA finals as the underdogs (after starting their season with four losses and two wins), even though they lost to Tennessee. The problem with the controversial remark was not only was it racist and sexist, but it robbed the players of their celebratory moment of actually making it to the finals, regardless of the outcome. The April 16 broadcast, "Response to Imus," focused on the April 4 controversy that eventually resulted in Imus's suspension and then his being fired. According to the Oprah.com Web site, African American poet Dr. Maya Angelou said, "Isn't it ironic—poetically ironic—that here we are with the chance to say, 'What comes next?'" (The Oprah Winfrey Show, 2007). Dr. Angelou had also been the topic of some of Imus' negative remarks in the past. This episode showcased African American journalists and writers such as syndicated columnist Stanley Crouch, award-winning newspaper columnist Jason Whitlock and former editor-in-chief of Essence magazine Diane Weathers and poet, author and former editor of Essence Asha Bandele. Former president of the NAACP and member of the CBS board of directors Bruce Gordon, along with activist Rev. Al Sharpton and two-time Grammy award-winning India.Arie, who represented the younger generation of women who have positive messages in their music, were also guests. India.Arie's popular hit "I Am Not My Hair" (which was produced and released long before this controversy) is an ironic and iconic symbol of self-worth for African American women. This song's lyrics – "I am not my hair. I am not this skin/ I am not your expectations, no no/ I am not my hair/ I am not this

skin/ I am the soul that lives within" – are a testament to self-empowerment and self-esteem for African American women. Artists like Indie.Arie have already been discussing these social and political issues in their music, which makes the Imus controversy ripe for examination in social and academic arenas.

Further, on the April 16 program, New York Post journalist Stanley Crouch said that because of the Imus controversy, the issue [denigration of women] is "getting the attention it deserves" (The Oprah Winfrey Show, 2007). The April 17 broadcast, "A Hip Hop Town Hall," followed Imus' firing and featured a panel of experts including: music mogul and entrepreneur Russell Simmons; executive vice president at Warner Music Group Kevin Liles; former NAACP CEO and current president/CEO of the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network Dr. Benjamin Chavis; and Grammy-winning *conscious* rapper Common. Simmons who is not a rapper, but is recognized as a founding father of hip hop, said on the Oprah Winfrey show, "I almost want to thank him [Imus] for creating this forum. It's a long time coming" (The Oprah Winfrey Show, 2007, n.p.). Dr. Chavis stated on the show that "hip-hop artists are not responsible for what Don Imus did…there's no way that Don Imus can blame hip-hop for what he did…We've got to make it better…by making society better." Chavis concludes that "there's too much poverty, there's too much injustice, and there's too much bad treatment of women in our society" (The Oprah Winfrey Show, 2007, n.p.). *Conscious* rapper Common (who will also be profiled in Chapter 5) had little criticism about hip hop culture noting that his earliest memories of hip hop were about "consciousness." On the April 17 broadcast he stated, "Hip-hop has been this child that we had. Our elders kind of abandoned the child at a young age and said, 'Okay, we don't really understand this. We don't relate to

this...and now as hip-hop has evolved and grown up, our parents are expecting hip-hop to be perfect and to be right" (The Oprah Winfrey Show, 2007, n.p.).

Just months before, actor and comedian Michael Richards, best known for his role as the eccentric neighbor named Kramer on the hit television sitcom Seinfeld, found himself in the midst of controversy for using racial slurs. During his standup routine at the Laugh Factory in West Hollywood, Richards was interrupted by two black men, which led to his spewing racial epithets during his comedy routine. A video on entertainment Web site TMZ.com showed the actor yelling racial remarks and in an unfavorable light, unlike the well-known and well-liked character he played on the sitcom. CBS News (2006) published part of Richards' racial remarks in their story "'Kramer' Apologizes, Says He's Not Racist." Richards is quoted:

> Fifty years ago we'd have you upside down with a f-------[fucking] fork up your ass....You can talk, you can talk, you're brave now mother-----[fucker]. Throw his ass out. He's a n----- [nigger]! He's a n----- [nigger]! He's a n----- [nigger]! look, there's a n----- [nigger]! (CBS News, 2006, para. 6).

The use of the word "nigger" to denigrate African Americans along with other pejorative terms to degrade women of color contributes to the heated dialogue of race in contemporary times. This language is causing eyebrows to be raised by others outside the African-American persuasion. As quoted in an article by Howard Kurtz in the Washington Post (2007) titled Imus, Duke & The Media, Chicago Tribune columnist Clarence Page said,

> Imus' defenders argue that he shouldn't be punished while countless rap stars get away with using that word and much worse. That's a pretty feeble diversion from

> the question of why Imus felt compelled to use it against what he now admits was a thoroughly "inappropriate" target. (April 16, n.p.)

Actor Andy Dick, like Richards and Imus, are high-profile celebrities who are apologizing in the media for openly making racial slurs. According to CTVglobemedia, Dick, former co-star of the 1990s sitcom NewsRadio, jumped onstage during a standup routine by Ian Bagg at L.A.'s Improv on Saturday night and used the N-word as a way to make fun of Richards (December 2006). Apparently the actor joined Bagg onstage "grabbed the microphone and shouted at the crowd, "You're all a bunch of ..." – using the n-word" (CTVglobemedia, p. 1). Whatever the reason these actors and others feel comfortable degrading African Americans contributes to the ongoing contemporary dialogue of race matters in America.

In an effort to put an end to the use of the word "nigga" in black culture, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other civil rights leaders in July 2007 sought to bury what African Americans consider to be the country's most vicious insulting word – nigga – in an effort to symbolically end racist and disgusting language. The symbolic burial for the N-word was held in Detroit, a city largely populated by African Americans. The funeral, a metaphor for "the end," was part of a ritual to silence the bad word in American society. While weddings and births mark the beginning of life, funerals signify finality. Thus, the ritual signified the end of this type of negative or, depending on the situation, political speech. Of question is whether or not this symbolic ceremony will result in this society purging politically-incorrect and foul language from its vocabulary and culture. I argue that the odds are stacked against substantive change in this regard. The possibility of erasing the word "nigga" from our

society's vocabulary is about as possible as a man conceiving a child and giving birth. It is one of those terms that have been woven in the fabric of American culture.

One might wonder why a word that is used so much in American culture is causing such outrage in the 21st century. The Don Imus controversy set the stage for a larger moral discussion of language in the African American community. These kinds of controversies are further evidence that there's work to be done regarding race relations in this country.

Moreover, 20th century social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement contribute to the notion that these revolutions were specifically for and about African Americans. Of course, gang activity, welfare, housing projects, ghetto-life, poverty, drug use and female abuse are not exclusive to African Americans. However, if you take a close look at what is mediated to audiences one could quickly make that assumption. While rappers capitalize on addressing these social issues in the African American community, they are not an experience of all African Americans. Rappers tend to promote negative issues through music as a reflection of their personal experiences or class struggle. Most rappers, however, are considered the legitimate voice of the underprivileged and disadvantaged minority.

Washington Post writer Nekesa Mumbi Moody (2007) in her article "Rappers Cleaning Up Lyrics Post-Imus" notes that the Imus controversy may be the catalyst that brings focus to offensive language in rap music. Moody said, "Four months after outrage over Imus' sexist and racial comments led to intense scrutiny of rap's negative imagery, and as the genre's sales continue to plummet, some artists are publicly abandoning offensive language" (p. 1). Further, the article reports that corporations are dropping rap

acts from sponsorships due to explicit language. For example, popular rapper Twista was dropped from McDonald's summer concert series due to public pressure mounted due to his lyrics. Platinum-selling rapper Chamillionaire announced that his 2007 album "Ultimate Victory" would be "cuss-free and Nigger-free." The rapper said he didn't use profanity that much but "I've always used the N-word" (Moody, August 2, 2007). Whether the reason some people are trying to abandon the use of "nigga" is because it's a moral issue or if it is due to the Don Imus backlash, the dialogue surrounding its use is causing corporations, political leaders, rappers and others to address profanity and racial epithets in music.

In that vein, the Queens, New York-native and rapper, Nasir "Nas" Jones, addressed hip hop's social and cultural footing in his 2006 controversial album, "Hip Hop is Dead." Nas (pronounced Nahz) questioned hip hop's political voice and the lack of creative power with the naming of this album. Despite intense criticism by fellow rappers, Billboard in their article "Nas Scores Third No. 1 Album with 'Hip-Hop Is Dead'" shows the album taking the top spot the Billboard 200 charts, moving 355,000 albums the first week of its release (Hasty, 2006). In this dissertation, the social conditions of marginalized people whose social conditions are expressed in rap music and hip hop's ability to be a source of empowerment in African-American culture are explored.

Although rap music has undergone criticism from a cross-section of religious leaders, women's organizations, black feminists and fellow rappers among others, this study found that hip hop has the potential to use artistic expression to do more than offer social critique and analyses of contemporary black conditions such as race, social

injustice and inequality. While hip hop has traditionally addressed issues of the black social condition, this study uncovers evidence that hip hop involves a deeper motivation than delivering messages via rap music. Specifically, the genre's political orientation and its response to four issues that emerged since 2000 are examined through the lens of social movement theory. Overall, a critical analysis of hip hop's political orientation including the role of the political or *conscious* rapper and black politics in contemporary times and hip hop's response to social issues that received national media attention are examined.

Purpose of the Study

Hip hop has become a post-modern cultural phenomenon with social, political, and philosophical implications. In an attempt to understand the African American cultural experience, various disciplines such as black feminism, cultural and media studies were used in this dissertation. This study analyzes hip hop from a cultural, critical perspective including ideological, textual and case study analyses to illustrate how social ills are not only reflected in rap music but are addressed through activist efforts and political posturing. Specific overt political activity in the hip hop culture provided context evidenced by documented social conditions of marginalized citizens, mainly blacks. Song lyrics of pioneering political rappers such as Public Enemy and others add historical context to this study. Contemporary *conscious* rappers and their politically-tinged songs are also analyzed for political and social meaning.

The research used in this dissertation includes music industry research data, consumer market research, popular sources, hip hop Web sites, research literature and other sources to outline the cultural and social implications of hip hop. Literature from

cultural studies, critical social theory, black feminism and media studies are used to review rap from the perspective of its political orientation, pedagogy and expression of the current black experience. This dissertation contextualizes how hip hop culture and its subgenre, *conscious* rap music, assist in the development of political consciousness among young people in the post-civil rights era.

The major purposes of this qualitative study are: (1) to determine how hip hop serves as a vehicle for political discourse; (2) to determine to what extent events in popular culture help fuel debate regarding the use of racist, sexist language in popular culture; (3) to determine to what extent hip hop constitute what is defined as a traditional social movement, and (4) to ascertain how select conscious rappers use hip hop to voice political discontent through their music in the early 21st century.

Chapter One includes the theoretical framework and methodology for the study. The dissertation is comprised of five additional chapters.

Chapter Two, The Review of Literature, documents scholarly research dedicated to the emergence and evolution of hip hop and its politics through music including, but not limited to, hip hop's contribution to democracy and its use of activism to educate and empower its constituency of young adults.

Chapter Three, Hip Hop Is Dead?: Black Politics and Hip Hop Culture, is a critical analysis of hip hop's politics and response to political issues regarding free speech, presidential elections, the work of select hip hop nonprofit activist organizations and black activism in hip hop culture. Hip hop as a culture is examined through the lens of social movement theory to analyze the complexities of whether the genre is revolutionary as a social movement or simply an entertainment venue.

Chapter Four, Reality Rap: Performing Black Politics utilizes *textual analysis* to examine politically-tinged music lyrics by underground rap artists, militant political rappers, and popular *conscious* rappers whose music is specifically laced with political messages. The artists themselves are also profiled to give context to their political ideology, personal activist efforts and personal social struggles.

Chapter Five, Ideological Case Study Analyses of *Conscious* Rappers Kanye West and Common, examines hip hop's most recognized cultural producers of knowledge, fashion, personal style and black politics. These two rappers enjoy crossover mainstream acceptance.

Chapter Six, Conclusion and Implications for Future Study, recounts where hip hop began, where it stands today as a possible political force and its potential to influence American politics at the turn of the millennium. It also identifies opportunities to expand work on this contemporary topic.

What is Hip Hop?

Forbes business magazine reports that hip hop, an important cultural art form and a powerful economic industry, generates $10 billion annually (Watson, February 18, 2004). Hip hop has emerged as a distinctive cultural phenomenon in America and, in the last decade, has global merchandising significance and deep cultural implications. Initially ignored by corporate America, hip hop has begun to evolve, contributing to American politics and taking on protest efforts to bolster a political consciousness among youth activists. In other words, some hip hop artists have become well-known activists and others scrape the surface of activism, nonetheless focusing on an agenda outside the music genre in an effort to target marginalized minorities to engage in the practice of

democracy. Even though violence, sex, misogyny and crime are sensationalized in hip hop, the hip hop activist understands the juxtaposition between the power of the genre and impressionable youth audiences.

Hip hop, as a culture, deals with the complexity of where African Americans find themselves in America – a place of constant struggle. Struggle is at the core of African-American music. In a capitalistic society where inequality, discrimination and other social ills are prevalent, it can be argued that to be born black is the starting point of struggle. Titon et al. (1984) suggest that music connects people who share the commonality of struggle. Music is a powerful medium that allows people, particularly mainstream youth, an opportunity take a peek at issues in the black community such as injustice, oppression and racism. Contemporary struggles faced by African-Americans include racism, poverty, AIDS, police brutality, inequality, lack of educational resources, decaying communities, lack of health care, drug use, teen pregnancy, runaway teens, absent fathers, violence and gender inequality. These struggles help influence the musical art form known as rap, a subgenre of hip hop.

In the last 30 years, hip hop has evolved from an underground urban art form into the largest selling music phenomenon created by blacks, yet selling to primarily white audiences. Many scholars contributed to popular music studies over the last several years. Within the small body of academic research available, the terms "rap" and "hip hop" have been used synonymously in the analysis of hip hop as a music genre. For the purpose of this study, "rap" will refer to a style of music that one performs and be examined as a subculture of hip hop. The term "hip hop" will be used as both a cultural product and type of experience or "politically progressive movement." Hip hop in the

1990s became a topic ripe for analysis from ethnomusicologists, cultural studies scholars, public intellectuals, sociologists and folklorists (Keyes, 2004, XIII).

The early days of rap can be categorized into four components: MCing, break dancing, graffiti, and DJing. With its ghetto roots, hip hop in its infancy focused on MC's reciting lyrics to motivate dancing. Hip hop's first hit record, "Rapper's Delight" by the Sugarhill Gang, was introduced in 1979. Hip hop historians point to Bronx-based disc jockeys (DJ's) such as Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash and others as the first "fathers" of the art form. While "Rapper's Delight" achieved minimal success in corporate arenas, it would take a few years before hip hop would evolve into a valuable commodity.

Rappers have emerged as present-day orators whose rebellious and anti-establishment rhetoric speak to a generation of young people seeking identification and authentication, much like the anti-establishment rhetoric of the 1960s of icons such as Malcolm X. Rap music connects the urban environment with social conditions understood by urban youth and, at the same time, creates a window for those outside the cultural realm to take a peek into the world of the black, talented and furious. Hip hop culture is responsible for the materialization of cultural products such as dance, hair styles, black language, music, fashion and style, all which are integral to the entirety of hip hop.

The Rap Genre

Based on oral music traditions, several categories of rap music have evolved. Pop rap includes rap themes about love, cars, urban life, sex, violence and clothes. Aldridge and Carlin (1993) suggest that pop rap is the least popular of the genre because it has

more mainstream acceptance due to its lack of focus on social realities and problems. The artists who embody this style of rap include Run D.M.C., MC Hammer, L. L. Cool J and Fresh Prince (Will Smith). Their artistry embodies bragging and exaggerations of the aforementioned themes (Kitwana, 1994).

Hardcore rap is another subgenre of hip hop that uses explicit lyrics about sex. Kitwana (1994) notes that drug and alcohol use as well as violence are underlying themes in this genre, noting that access to firearms depicts the "gun as a symbol of 'macho' power" (p. 33). According to Aldridge and Carlin (1993), a leading example of this type rap music is 2Live Crew, whose sexually-obscene lyrics led to the use of warning labels on material deemed "sexually explicit and violent."

Gangsta rap signifies urban ghetto conditions and gang mentality. Those rising to the top of this genre include Niggas Wit Attitudes (N.W.A.), Dr. Dre, Ice-T, Tupac Shakur, Snoop Dogg and The Notorious B.I.G. The lyrics of this genre speak to gang activity, gun violence, drug sales, drug and alcohol use, misogyny and "bling bling" or excessive materialism.

Activist or *conscious* rap is the genre that is primarily analyzed in this dissertation. The other forms of rap music will provide a historical context. *Conscious* rap provides insight about self improvement and empowerment as well as embrace the work of African American leaders and intellectuals "past and present." Aldridge and Carlin (1993) identify KRS-One and Public Enemy as the most influential in this genre during the decade of the 1990s. Although hip hop has been around for more than 30 years, it is like a child that needs nurturing and sustenance to exist. It has had many growth spurts, yet it continues to evolve without its own independence. In essence, it has yet to be

clearly defined. Hip hop, as a vehicle for change, has social movement characteristics because it rises to the occasion when necessary and concedes until another a critical issue arises, a process that is analyzed in Chapter 3.

Hip hop is incorporated into the political consciousness of minority youth, enabling them to address issues of oppression, racism and other forms of inequality. The goal of politically-charged hip hop is to cultivate a new generation of young people to take substantive political action. Yet, the impact of whether political lyrics contribute to voting trends among America's youth has yet to be determined.

In this dissertation, I used pioneering political rap music of the 1980s (Public Enemy, NWA and others) to give context and dimension to this study. Contemporary *conscious* rap music in the early 21st century was also examined. In addition, activist efforts by hip hop's leading music mogul, Russell Simmons, whose overt efforts focus on young, disenfranchised, marginalized minorities were explored. Further, the social context regarding the Don Imus controversy – a popular radio personality who used sexist, racist commentary on his program – added dimension to this study as it relates to political, commercial and free speech interwoven with cultural differences and black ideology.

Methodology and Rationale

Qualitative methods are appropriate for this study because they allow the researcher the opportunity to analyze selected artifacts (text) which has been presented to audiences or consumers by discovery and interpretation. Specifically, qualitative research methods are defined by Van Maanen (1983) as "an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which see to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to

terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world" (p. 9). While early mass communication was typically quantitative, Frey, Anderson and Friedman (1998) assert that qualitative methods have "achieved a more legitimate place in communication education" (p. 247). Lindlof (1995) suggests four characteristics of qualitative study include: "a theoretical interest in human interpretational processes; a concern with the study of socially situated human action and artifacts; the use of human investigators as the primary research instruments; and, qualitative study relies primarily on narrative forms for coding data and writing the texts to be presented to audiences" (p. 22). Anderson and Meyer (1988) explain that qualitative research methods are "distinguished from quantitative methods in that they do not rest their evidence on the logic of mathematics, the principle of numbers, or the methods of statistical analysis" (p. 247). Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggest the critical tradition of qualitative research as a blanket term to describe a set of several alternative paradigms such as neo-Marxism, feminism and materialism (p. 111). Further, the critical theorist serves is concerned with historical, social, political and economic environments.

Textual analysis serves several purposes in this study. It allows the researcher to examine texts for meaning and context, in this case, song lyrics, news stories and activist efforts about specific musicians and hip hop leaders. Further, *textual analysis* is appropriate to infer meaning of a text (such as rap lyrics) by analyzing the producer of the text, the social context in which the text was produced and the message of the text.

British cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1980) describes three levels of analysis when examining media texts. The first level of analysis is the dominant or preferred meaning. He states that "dominant" means a pattern of preferred meanings exist

and are embedded as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs (p. 134). The second level of analysis is the negotiated code. The author explains that negotiated readings of messages involve "particular or situated logics" (p. 137). The final level of analysis is the "oppositional" readings of text. He writes:

> It is possible for a viewer perfectly to understand both the literal and connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a globally contrary way. (p. 137)

Hall (1980) offers a critical view of the communicative process of encoding and decoding signs in media texts. He suggests that messages (and iconic signs) have meanings that can be encoded or decoded through a chain of meaningful discourse. Further, Hall explains that the degree of understanding depends on the communicative exchange between the encoder (producer) and the decoder (receiver), as well as the identity/non-identity between the codes that have been transmitted. He states,

> Certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned so early an age they appear not to be constructed – the effect of an articulation between sign and referent – but to be "naturally" given. Simple visual signs appear to have achieved a "near-universality" in this sense: through evidence remains that even apparently "natural" visual codes are culture-specific. (p. 132)

Kellner (2000) posits that when deconstructing media texts, *textual analysis* is important because it "helps to reveal their codes and conventions, their value and ideologies, and thus their meanings and messages" (p. 200). Further, Kellner claims that in such an analysis,

> Critical cultural studies should analyze representations of class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, and other identity markers in the texts of media culture, as well as attending to national, regional, and other cultural differences, how they are articulated in cultural representations, and how these differences among audiences create different readings and receptions of cultural texts. (p. 200)

A main concern of utilizing *textual analysis* is to have the availability of complete and accurate texts (Frey et al., 1998). In that vein, the lyrics used have been attained through a multitude of sources, including transcripts available from the World Wide Web and liner notes from rappers' album/CD covers. These sources provide the text (song lyrics) in the manner they were originally produced, resulting in complete and accurate texts. Other texts analyzed in this study include news stories and popular sources. This study does not intend to provide a solution to problems that exist in America or in the black community. What it does intend to do is interpret specific actions of leaders influenced by or concerned with social and political issues regarding contemporary race matters. Further, it demonstrates that hip hop's influence extends beyond music and identifies rappers who use the ideology of protest to bolster youth participation in the practice of democracy.

In addition to textual analysis, *case study* as methodology will be utilized as part of the analysis in this study in the examination of Grammy-winning controversial rap artist Kanye West, whose popularity landed him on the covers of mainstream media publications TIME, Rolling Stone, Entertainment Weekly and other popular culture publications. In addition, hip hop's response to the "nappy-headed hos" comment by talk

radio host Don Imus in 2007 will be included in the case study analysis. West, who called President George W. Bush a racist on national television during a live telecast following during the Hurricane Katrina disaster, became the center of media attention following his outburst. Yin (1994) characterized the case study as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 13). Case study can provide a more in-depth presentation of the subject that is being examined (p. 52). Moreover, Hamel (1993) referred to the case study method as "the descriptive study, par excellence and in depth" (p. 33). Hamel further notes that the case study is appropriate with qualitative methods because it helps to describe, understand and explain phenomena (p. 39). This study interprets certain phenomena in hip hop culture and explains the context from a critical perspective.

As James W. Carey (1989) posits, "Our task, is to construct a reading of the text. The text itself is a sequence of symbols—speech, writing, gesture—that contain interpretations. Our task like that of a literary critic is to interpret the interpretations" (p. 60). My interpretations will be considered in a larger social and cultural context in how hip hop serves as a tool for political discourse through political posturing and how rap music, through "identification" and "representation" is a mess of contradictions. Critics argue that rap music degrades minorities through its portrayals of young black males and misogyny, gold chains, diamond-studded teeth, among other stereotypical interpretations. On the other hand, there are "conscious" hip hop musicians whose efforts are geared toward political action, including providing a positive message (through music and actions) for impressionable young minority audiences. Chapters Four and Five provide a

comprehensive look into hip hop activism, political music lyrics and the role of contemporary *conscious* rappers in hip hop culture.

Rationale

The *conscious* hip hop artists profiled in this dissertation and whose lyrics are selected for analysis include Talib Kweli and rapper/actor Dante Terrell "Mos Def" Smith. Kanye West and Lonnie Rashid "Common" Lynn will be examined as the rappers with cross-over appeal to mainstream audiences, who have risen to the top of the social and political genre and have enjoyed industry success. Some *underground* artists (artists not signed to major record labels and/or have large underground audiences) outside the media-driven gangsta genre were explored. One of the most prolific *underground* rap artists, Dead Prez, makes message music that is considered strictly political in terms of the social problems they address. In terms of rap delivery or style, the duo falls in the middle of extremes – not quite as militant as gangsta rappers Niggaz Wit Attitudes (NWA) and not as boisterous as Public Enemy the previous decade. Another group, The Roots, who are known more for their live performances and political message music, were examined as underground political rappers.

The review of literature suggests that hip hop, as a culture, has a crucial role in the politics of race, gender and class related to minority groups. In addition, the genre conforms to the dominant ideology due to the hegemonic control and ownership by predominantly Caucasian-run record corporations. In order for mainstream hip hop to be identified as a political force, there must be a cross-over appeal to audiences outside the marginalized and disenfranchised. While there is dense research on the negative aspects of rap music, there is a void in the academic literature regarding hip hop politics, how it

can be used as a tool for political discourse and its incorporation of black consciousness and ideology. This dissertation contributes to the scholarly study of hip hop through an examination of *conscious* rappers and their contributions to political discourse, activism in hip hop culture and hip hop as a possible social movement. Each has been minimally explored academically and this study fills a void in the literature on this contemporary topic. By taking a critical approach to examining hip hop as a possible social movement and examining its contribution to political discourse, this study uncovered revolutionary characteristics within hip hop culture and found a connection between black politics, black ideology and popular culture.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

"Hip hop is not my life but it has been a large part of it. There have been times I've loved it more than any woman. There have times I hated it with the viciousness usually reserved for a cheating lover. Today, just past forty, I have affection for it but my love wavers sometimes, as it the culture as a woman I loved long ago, now can barely remember why, yet still can't forget."

-Nelson George (1998, p. 22)

This dissertation examines hip hop music through the use of critical analysis and ideological criticism. Rappers seek to make a profit through commentary on a multitude of issues including political, economic, social and philosophical issues. Several popular rap acts, including Tupac Shakur, Christopher "Notorious B.I.G.," Ice-T, Niggas Wit Attitudes (NWA), Dr. Dre, Snoop Doggy Dogg and others, have been accused of either glorifying violence, promoting promiscuous behavior or gratuitously using obscene language. On another level, rap acts such as Public Enemy, Dead Prez, Common and Kanye West, among other lesser known "underground" artists, have contributed to confronting social and political issues through their music, which is part of the focus of this study.

Rap Music and the Academy

Within the dearth of research available, the studies of rap music as black speech involve varying scholarly opinions documenting the history of rap and its impact or contribution economically to American society. In most studies, the analyses focus on

misogynistic lyrics, women bashing, the gangsta persona and other deviant behaviors. These perspectives are significant to this study because of the varying perspectives on the public discourse of black music as cultural artifacts (text), social interaction and cultural expressions. In the last decade, more studies have been conducted on the popular genre by cultural studies critics, post-modern, black feminists and other critics seeking to explain the complexities and contradictions of the hip hop subculture known as rap.

Cheryl L. Keyes (1992) suggest that rap music has African and Western roots and concludes that rap is an expressive art form that serves as an agent for social control and as a political forum. In addition, Keyes notes that rap music serves as a conduit for socio-economic mobility for black youth. One criticism of Keyes' research is that it fails to demonstrate the relationship between rap, capitalism and socio-economic mobility.

Angela M. S. Nelson (1999) in her book This Is How We Flow suggests that "the art of rapping is based on a precise knowledge, skill, and ability to use complex rhythms, rappers themselves boast of their skill in being able to control it" (p. 46). Denise A. Herd (1997), in an article about the politics of representation, wrote that "rap music is regarded as a major form of cultural resistance and social protest for black youth who are increasingly alienated and marginalised (sic) in cities suffering from decayed infrastructures, police oppression, and pervasive poverty" (p. 135). The author further notes that black boys and young men are "the special targets of increased police surveillance and attacks" (p. 135).

Reebee Garofalo (1993) notes that rap music's evolution can be traced from its beginnings with "pioneers such as Afrika Bambaatta and Grandmaster Flash." Garofalo examined black popular music and found that rap music must be understood as "one

cultural element within a larger social movement known as hip hop, which also included breakdancing and graffiti art." Further, Garofalo asserts that "since its widespread mainstream acceptance, rap has been associated with sexism, violence, anti-Semitism, and has become – along with heavy metal – the music which currently defines youth culture and the main target of a movement to suppress certain forms of popular music." The author notes that "the movement" started around the same time as disco but flourished as a "self-contained street movement" before gaining a broader audience a few years later (p. 245).

Public intellectual and cultural critic Dr. Michael Eric Dyson (2000) suggests that some of the world's best orators, including Martin Luther King, Jr., were linked to the origins of hip hop by their use of black orality. Dyson contrasts King's ability to use political speech to reach the African American masses to that of Tupac Shakur, a successful gangsta rapper who, like King, was also slain at the height of his career. He stated that "hip-hop is deeply indebted to the secular elements of black music and oral culture" (p. 179).

Critics of the genre suggest that hip hop culture devalues the black female identity and exploits hypersexualization, materialism, violence and misogyny. Hard core (gangsta) rappers are mainly the black ghetto poor who are familiar with social problems such as police brutality, white racism and economic depression. Dyson (2000) concludes that these problems lead to other problems. He states,

> These forces lead to a host of self-destructive ills: black-on-black homicide, drug addiction, and the thug life that so many rappers celebrate and, in a few cases, embrace (p. 184).

Dyson continues his examination of hard core rap by noting that gangsta griots understand the environments from which they came. He writes,

> For instance, on his "The Ghetto Won't Change," hard-core rapper Master P expresses the widely held belief among blacks that the carnage-inducing drug trade flourishes in the ghetto because of government complicity and white indifference. On "Point Tha Finga," Tupac Shakur gives voice to the rage many blacks feel when they realize that their hard-earned wages are subsidizing their own suffering at the hands of abusive police. For Shakur, the ethical line drawn between cops and criminals is even more blurred by the police's immoral behavior (p. 184).

Dyson postulates that critics point to the black freedom struggle as the "basis of criticism of hip-hop culture" (p. 191). Further, in his 1996 book entitled Between God and Gangsta Rap, Dyson argues that black life has many divisions that have much to do with class and cultural identification based on "gender, class, sexuality, authenticity, and generation" (p. xii).

To counter the criticism of the genre, Aldridge and Carlin (1996) posit that "a negative reaction to much rap music is often a result of a lack of understanding about the music's purpose" (p. 102). I argue that rap music's cultural implications and the genre's lyrical analysis need further scholarly examination. Molefi Asante (1988) in the book, Afrocentricity, notes that critics of African American discourse should be cognizant of three things: (1) Competence – "includes the analytic skills with which the scholar investigates his subject," (2) Clarity of perspective – "the ability to focus on the Afrocentric issues in the subject area and to interpret those issues in a way that will

expose the essential factors constituting the subject," and (3) Understanding of the object – means the "scholar knows something of the interrelationships of his subject and the world context" (p. 60).

Paul E. Peterson (1995) wrote about the politics of race and addressed issues African-Americans face in the political system. He notes that there is a cultural poverty paradox whereby street life in the ghetto is exhilarating, even if for a short period of time. He postulates that, "In a world where jobs are dull, arduous, or difficult to obtain and hold, it is more fun to hang out, make love, listen to and tell exaggerated stories of love and danger, plan parties and escapades, and exhibit one's latest purchases or conquests" (p. 366). Peterson argues in a provocative manner that "gangs provide young people thrills, protection, mutual support, friendship, prestige, and enough income to allow them to buy fashionable clothes, alcohol, and drugs" (p. 366). Contributing to the poverty paradox, Peterson refers to William Julius Wilson's book, The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, The Underclass, and Public Policy for explanation of continued poverty through anthropological studies. According to Peterson, Wilson's research suggests that the urban underclass's existence is "not the result of government handouts, but as the social by-product of a changing economy whose uneven impact was leaving inner cities with extraordinarily high levels of unemployment" (p. 369). In his book, Race Matters, cultural scholar Dr. Cornel West (1993) claims that "We must acknowledge that as people – *E Pluribus Unum* – we are on a slippery slope toward economic strife, social turmoil, and cultural chaos. If we go down, we go down together…The paradox of race in America is that our common destiny is more pronounced and imperiled precisely when our divisions are deeper" (p. 4).

In her article, "Recognizing the Enemy: Rap Music in the Wake of the Los Angeles Riots," Theresa Martinez (1993) found that rap lyrics express problems with anti-establishment, pain, anger, lack of trust and injustice for African Americans. Barry Brummett (1994), in his book Rhetoric in Popular Culture, states that "power is managed in moment-to-moment, everyday experience (including popular culture) far more often that it is in single grand events" (p. 101). So, while certain key events such as the American Civil Rights Movement of the sixties, the Vietnam War, as well as the rise of hip hop in the eighties, contribute to the contemporary politicization of hip hop, it is the music of each decade that permeates the cultural landscape of our society.

In the book, The Postmodern Turn: Perspectives on Social Theory (1994), African-American scholar and public intellectual Dr. Cornel West examines the new cultural politics of difference, and his research echoes the very political and social issues rappers discuss in their music. Urban social issues are the essence of the political messages that the hip hop artists and activists deliver to their audiences. He writes,

> The recent cutbacks of social service programs, business takebacks at the negotiation tables of workers and management, speedups at the workplace and buildups of military budgets reinforce this perception. And surely the growing disintegration and decomposition of civil society – of shattered families, neighborhoods and schools – adds to this perception.... The new cultural politics of difference tries to confront these enormous and urgent challenges. (p. 79)

Similarly, popular culture scholar Jon Michael Spencer (1992) suggest that rap music tends to "attract youths who are protest listeners, persons who, as players of language and

listening politics, listen to rap as a means of protesting against the establishment" (p. 447).

Scholars and theorists have written about African American politics with emphasis on civil rights, black power movements and political crisis. Bohlman (1993) in his article "Musicology as a Political Act" notes that "music not only as the texts and lyrics of rap songs, but music as an arresting form of attention, a means of commanding public spaces, and a context for the narration of history" (p. 413). One continuous theme that has emerged in hip hop culture in the millennium is a focus on national elections and a push to increase voting among minority groups. Thus, American elections are an integral opportunity for black voters to exert national political influence in order to help make a difference in their communities. Some of hip hop's most successful and influential music moguls, such as Sean "Diddy" Combs and entrepreneur and philanthropist Russell Simmons, contribute to the discourse regarding social change through their planned political public relations events. They have used national elections as a platform to educate and empower young people to register to vote. Further, Simmons uses his business acumen and celebrity status to host empowerment summits in large cities in the United States to engage minorities and business leaders in discussions about the elimination of poverty, police brutality, racism and the need for quality education, healthcare and other issues relative to services where minorities are neglected or disenfranchised. Chapter Three details the intricacies of Simmons' activist efforts.

Hip Hop – Progressive Movement Implications

It can be argued that hip hop serves as a progressive or social movement. In this vein, it is important to note that social movements thrive on conflict. Such is the case

with hip hop and its deep cultural implications. Historically, social movements have included issues such as race, gender, peace and environmental concerns. Piven and Cloward (1995) note that movements are not likely to have much impact unless "economic and social conditions are already eroding established electoral allegiances and coalitions" (p. 235). Further, the authors assert that "significant change-oriented movements are not likely to emerge except during periods of economic and social instability" (p. 235). Hence, the eroding of black communities mainly in urban settings gives reason to mobilize and seek economic justice for minority groups. Moreover, overt actions by hip hop musicians have contributed to the politicization of hip hop utilizing progressive movement strategies. For instance, hip hop music mogul Russell Simmons and civil rights leader, Dr. Ben Chavis, co-founded the Hip Hop Summit Action Network (HSAN) in 2001 to harness the "cultural relevance of Hip-Hop music to serve as a catalyst for education advocacy and other societal concerns fundamental to the empowerment of youth" (HSAN, 2007). According to the HSAN's Web site, this non-profit, non-partisan organization is a "coalition of hip hop artists, industry leaders, education advocates, civil rights proponents, and youth leaders united in belief that Hip-Hop is an enormously influential agent for social change which must be responsibility and proactively utilized to fight the war on poverty and injustice." In 2003, HSAN organized a national campaign to "Transform America" by registering 20 million voters beginning with a successful kick-off in Detroit with over 17,000 participants. The political agenda consisted of mobilizing thousands of 18-35 year old minorities to register to vote before the 2004 presidential election.

Darnovsky, Epstein and Flacks (1995) in the book Cultural Politics and Social Movements explored intellectual discourse about social movements and theorists' attitudes toward democracy. The authors assert that academic theorizing about movements has been grounded in "ideological preconceptions" in earlier studies (1950s) where analyses of social movements emphasized "collective behavior." The decade of the 1960s transformed social reality and social theory. The Civil Rights Movement posed a "fundamental challenge to the 'collective behavior' framework." The authors note that the 1960s movements challenged the "pragmatic, reformist, pluralist perspectives that underpinned much of the media treatment of protest and provided the defining framework for the various public commissions (Kerner, Eisenhower, Scranton) that formulated policy proposals for dealing with it" (p. x). The book suggests that New Social Movement theorists emphasized that "social transformation is mediated through culture as well as politics narrowly defined—that the personal and cultural are politically real as, and are not reducible to, power struggles in the state and economy" (p. xiv).

The question of "Are we living in a movement society?" is one that scholar Sidney Tarrow explores in the book Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics. Tarrow (1996) asserts that "when backed by dense social networks and galvanized by culturally resonant, action-oriented symbols, contentious politics leads to sustained interaction with opponents. The result is the social movement" (p. 3). The author further notes that "contentious collection action is the basis of social movements, not because movements are always violent or extreme, but because it is the main and often the only recourse that ordinary people possess against better-equipped opponents or powerful states" (p. 3). Movements do more than contend; they help build organizations,

elaborate ideologies and socialize and mobilize constituencies. The author notes that early theorists (including Emile Durkheim, 1951) saw social movements as the "result of anomie and social disorganization" (p. 4). Tarrow (1996) asserts that "contentious politics emerges in response to changes in political opportunity and constraints, with participants responding to a variety of incentives: material, ideological, partisan and group-based, long-standing and episodic" (p. 10). While all conflicts are not class based, there are overlapping interests and values that people will consider "good reason" to sacrifice their time and risk their skin to do so. Trapp (2005) explored hip hop as both the engine and mirror of a social movement and found that "hip-hop artists adopt a critical – even hostile – stance toward the White-controlled state, government, and media, often seeking to delegitimize these institutions and draw attention to racial injustice and social neglect" (p. 1483). Solidarity and collective identity is important in mobilizing consensus. Tarrow states that the participants' recognition of their common interests "translates the potential for movement into action" (p. 6). Interestingly, this line of research has not been fully explored in the study of hip hop culture or rap music. However, a more in-depth critical analysis of hip hop as a social movement is examined in Chapter 3.

Hip Hop: A Popular Commodity

Hegemonic control within media industries, particularly the music industry, is powerful. Economically, hip hop is a multi-billion dollar industry that is mainly controlled by mainstream or white-owned media institutions. The power structure dictates what sells and how it is marketed to consumers. In that vein, *conscious* or *underground* rap music is less popular and the least of the rap subgenres to reach

mainstream audiences on a global scale due to its social implications and positive messages. *Political rap*, a close cousin to underground rap, delivers its messages in a militant fashion. For example, Public Enemy (PE) and the Houston, Texas-based group, Dead Prez, provide listeners a more powerful militant delivery of messages. In contrast, rappers such as Lonnie Rashid "Common" Lynn (formerly Common Sense) and Kanye West are examples of the handful of rappers that are exceptions to this rule (which will be discussed in Chapter 5). This dissertation offers analyses of the socially and politically-conscious rapper. Since these two sub-genres both deal with social ills on some level, the terms *conscious* and *political* rapper are used synonymously in this dissertation.

An analysis of specific *conscious* rappers and their political music will be further examined in Chapters Four and Five. Because hip hop is a vehicle that helped so many rappers rise from poverty to become household names, the consumer may not be aware of the complexities involved in record contracts and unfair contracts. As the biggest-selling music form in America, hip hop's authenticity of translation is being questioned due to the dominant popularized versions of the X-rated song versus the cleaned-up "radio version." Nonetheless, Forbes writers Goldman and Paine (2007) note that hip hop has "spawned an impressive cadre of musicians-cum-entrepreneurs who have parlayed their fame into lucrative entertainment empires" (August 16, 2007). The portrayal of rap moguls has been framed in the media within criminal metaphors, with their success tied to their rise from criminal to rapper to mogul. Some rappers, such as Ice Cube and Ice-T, indeed have been able to enjoy success from street thug to rapper to film star. Although their most recent work is now in either television or film, they haven't disassociated themselves from the rap genre. Also, marketing and branding of hip hop extends beyond

a commercialized genre and, through commodification, assists in forming black cultural production on a global scale.

Goldman and Paine's (2007) Forbes article "Hip-Hop Cash Kings," named the genre's top 20 money-making rappers based on income for the year 2006. Raised in Brooklyn, New York's Marcy Projects, Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter, leads the pack with an estimated $34 million, earning him the top spot in Forbes' first-ever list of hip-hop Cash Kings. His income is derived from more than one source, topping the charts in 2006 with the release of his comeback album "Kingdom Come." The master rapper also serves as president of Def Jam Recordings and is co-founder of Roc-A-Fella Records. Further, hip hop's number one mogul owns the 40/40 Club sport bar franchise, with locations in New York and Atlanta, and collects income from blue-chip endorsements with Budweiser, Hewlett-Packard, and General Motors (August 16, 2007). Sean 'Diddy' Combs, who ranked at number three with an estimated income of $28 million heads Bad Boy World Wide Entertainment, which includes the Warner-backed Bad Boy Records, owns Sean John clothing and has a signature cologne, Unforgivable, which he licensed to Estee Lauder. Combs is executive producer of several MTV series, including the popular *Making the Band* franchise, and owns the New York and Atlanta locations of Justin's restaurants. These rappers depict the commodified representations of blackness and the success of economic enterprise in hip hop culture.

Sociologist Herman Gray (2005) in his book Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation examined black cultural forms and practices to grasp how "[Gray's italics] *culture matters politically and how politics matter culturally*" (p. 3). Gray addressed issues with the media, commodification and technology as social

forces structuring the "conditions of possibility within which black cultural politics are enacted, constrained and mediated" (p. 3). Further, Gray suggests that commodified representations of American blackness "circulate widely via mass media and popular culture, achieving in the process some measure of global visibility, influence, admiration, imitation, or scorn" (p. 4). Hip hop as a commodified and commercialized genre gives hope to minority youth that they too can create or imitate the lifestyles of the "Cash Kings" without regard to education. Paul E. Peterson (1995) notes that in order to reduce the alienation between minority youth and the mainstream institutions in society, human capital must be developed. He states, "The current expensive, bureaucratically controlled, hierarchical, rule-bound, stratified, gang-infested system of urban education needs to be drastically changed" (p. 371).

Social change is an underlying theme that is woven in discussion in the hip hop community. Hip hop author Bynoe (2004) in her article, "Hip Hop as a Political Tool," suggests that strategies should be formulated that "use hip hop to foster young people's interest in and engagement with issues that impact them and their communities" (June, 2004). Bynoe states,

> This new use of hip hop is a sharp departure from the more common but less effective practice of using it to either lure young people to political events or as a vehicle for young people to write and rap about issues, but not to devise ways to resolve them. (n.p.)

Further, Bynoe posits that social change agents should "use hip hop within a political or civic framework by getting young people to begin to think critically about themselves, their world and their role as citizens." (n.p.)

Definitions/Colloquialisms

For the purpose of this study, it is important to identify terms that will be utilized throughout this dissertation. First, it is imperative to substantiate the meaning of the word "politics" as it will be examined in opposition to the ideology of the dominant culture. In this dissertation, my use of politics involves anything that defines or encompasses any or all of the following: race, gender, class, power, authority, influence, social ills and cultural differences, specifically as it relates to minority groups.

The following terms (used throughout this dissertation) provide clarification and understanding of cultural differences in mainstream and black popular culture:

- Hip hop – describes a cultural movement developed in the early 1970s as an outlet for urban youth (particularly blacks and Latinos) with an anti-establishment ideology to express themselves creatively through art, music, dress, language and so forth.
- Rap – a subgenre of hip-hop that depicts aspects of urban life such as poverty, education, issues of race and discrimination in music lyrics.
- *Conscious* Rap – a subgenre of hip hop generally dominated by artists with positive, political messages that encourage education, self-esteem, democracy and self-reliance.
- Political Rap – synonymous with *conscious* rap music that generally reflects anti-establishment ideology, anti-government control, discontent with most forms of authority including the police and bureaucratic government.
- Derogatory language – defined as culturally offensive words or insulting remarks about women, race, gender, class, etc.

- Nigga, Niggaz, and Nigger – commonly referred to as the N-word; considered the *most* insulting word used by mainstream audiences to define African Americans. Also used by African Americans as a cultural term of endearment in music and in everyday dialogue, although frequent use of the term does not mean acceptance by most African Americans.
- Struggle – defined as a fight/conflict over a period of time of marginalized or disenfranchised people whose social conditions are expressed in rap music lyrics.
- Bitches and Hos (slang for Whores) – a demeaning term used regularly in African American culture and in rap music to classify women as prostitute-like.
- Hardcore Rap – a subgenre of hip hop that uses graphic language, negative images, misogyny, sex, violence, and depictions of life in urban environments.
- Gangsta (Gangster) Rap – a subgenre of hip hop that reflects rebellion, street hustling, drug use and ghetto conditions that include drug dealing, police profiling and brutality, economic strife, anti-establishment and anti-police rhetoric.

CHAPTER III

HIP HOP IS DEAD?: BLACK POLITICS AND HIP HOP CULTURE

> "But now, with the industry on the ropes and the political sphere energized, the transformative power of hip-hop may finally be reemerging. Over the past decade, hip-hop-based community groups have recharged the social justice movement and launched get-out-the-vote campaigns in neighborhoods most candidates and parties wouldn't touch."
>
> - Jeff Chang (2007, n.p.)

Part of the title of this chapter is taken from the album title "Hip Hop is Dead" by rapper Nasir "Nas" Jones, whose poignant lyrics are reflective of his views of hip hop in the 21st century. In this chapter, I use this title as a question to contextualize how hip hop culture and rap music assist in the development of political consciousness among young people in the post-civil rights era.

Since the turn of the 21st century, a multitude of social issues have provided opportunities for hip hop culture to further examine its own issues of disparaging language, homophobia, sexism and even racism. What kinds of issues are artists, intellectuals and politicians talking about in hip hop culture? To answer this question, my research identified four issues that have contributed to national contemporary discourse in the hip hop community regarding marginalized Americans (in particular African Americans) which include, but are not limited to: 1) the government's [i.e., President George W. Bush and the Federal Emergency Management Association's (FEMA)] slow response to Hurricane Katrina victims in August 2005; 2) the firing of radio shock jock

Don Imus for referring to Rutgers University's women's basketball team as "nappy headed hos" in 2007 and the national dialogue regarding hip hop and race matters that ensued; 3) grassroots efforts by national organizations to push an agenda for social justice issues; and 4) public support by hip hop artists to mobilize voters, age 18-24, to participate in presidential elections in 2004 and 2008. Specifically, the aforementioned social issues have been identified as having ongoing reference in the media that have been specifically addressed by musicians and leaders in hip hop culture. Further, while these topics have been a part of national dialogue in media outlets, I believe that exploring these particular issues will give specific focus to social, political and cultural actions in hip hop culture. I have identified these events as critical issues that have not only received national media attention, but they are relative issues that the hip hop community and African American leaders have directly taken to task. Therefore, this section addresses the research question, "How does hip hop serve as a tool for political discourse?" and seeks to explore hip hop's political orientation. For the purpose of this study, a critical analysis will provide insight into the study of blackness as it relates to political activity, black ideology and hip hop culture.

Critical Analysis and Hip Hop Culture

An effort to understand hip hop culture and the rap genre can be challenging and overwhelming. There is an abundance of information available in mainstream magazines, targeted African American publications, music magazines, the Internet, and most recently, in academia. Even though rap has been a vehicle for spreading socially-conscious and political rhetoric through focused lyrical content, one could argue the genre has essentially remained apolitical. This dissertation argues that focused activism

and grassroots efforts have not been extensively explored to show the overt political efforts in hip hop culture that demonstrate hip hop's contribution to social justice and how some supporters frame hip hop as a social movement. Further, socially-conscious rappers use rap as political message music that speak to ghetto conditions in urban America. Paradoxically, rappers are known for their anti-establishment outspokenness, yet research on overt political activity within the genre is scarce in academic research. Moreover, hip hop music does not have to express hostility in order to be labeled as protest music. However, hip hop, as a culture, can use itself in political ways (such as grassroots social efforts) to reach its audiences, thereby engaging its audience in the current cultural politics of the time. For African-Americans, hip hop has been shrouded in rhetorical discourse and as a so-called "movement" it provides magnificent insight into protest efforts that affect social progress. Further, the ideologies of race and representation in hip hop can produce particular knowledge in the analysis of media texts. This is why it is necessary in this study to utilize critical or qualitative analysis as it relates to ideology, music as a cultural artifact and social issues relative to the hip hop community and its audiences.

Qualitative, critical, analysis may incorporate various methodologies such as formal criticism, textual analysis and case study analysis. Further, significant to this study is the body of ideological critical analysis of race, class and representation. Ideological analysis is concerned with how cultural artifacts – in this case political music lyrics (as text) and overt political activity – produce particular knowledge in social contexts and position for marginalized Americans. Since this study employs ideological analysis, it is essential to discuss how ideological analysis has been utilized by other disciplines as a

research approach in studying media texts.

The term ideology is defined by Claude Mueller (as quoted in Berger, 2000) as an "integrated belief systems which provide explanations for political reality and establish the collective goals of a class or group" (p. 72). White (1992) suggests that ideological criticism has its origins in Marxist theories of culture and that ideological analysis is "based on the assumption that cultural artifacts – literature, film, television, and so forth – are produced in specific historical contexts, by and for specific social groups. It aims to understand culture as a form of social expression" (p. 163). Further, the author notes that "within society the ways in which meanings (values, beliefs, and ideas) are expressed through cultural texts, and the ways in which these meanings are received and understood by their audiences, is a dynamic process involving the interaction of multiple influences or determinations" (p. 163). Ideological criticism is concerned with the ways in which cultural practices and artifacts produce particular knowledge and positions for their users. Berger (2000) notes that the ideological critic, rooted in Marxist Theory, looks for the hidden meanings that "shape the consciousness of those who receive the messages" (p. 73). The author suggests that Marxist critics argue that "many people in the media, for example, do not recognize the extent to which their messages contain ideological content" (p. 73).

Multiple research approaches such as cultural anthropology, sociology, black feminist studies, political science, linguistics, psychology and others have used cultural studies and ideological criticism as a theoretical base for examining cultural issues (e.g. race, class, gender, politics, patriarchal power) seeking a deeper meaning of cultural artifacts, in this case political messages in music as text. Because cultural studies is a

broad theoretical framework, it is appropriate for use in this study because it offers the researcher flexibility of investigating cultural interpretations of music, black "representations" in popular culture and the signified meanings of black cultural politics expressed within the hip hop culture.

Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1996) posits that cultural studies is a discursive formation. He states that "it has no simple origins" (p. 263). Further, cultural studies offer a paradoxical development of identity. In hip hop, its messengers (the rappers) identify with the receivers of the message (the audience) by offering music lyrics that connect through identification and familiarity based on commonalities such as ghetto conditions, life on the "streets," race and social issues relative to minorities. Hall (1980) explains the "preferred" reading of texts,

> The domains of preferred meanings have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs: the everyday knowledge of social structures, of how things work for all practical purposes in this culture, the rank order of power and interest and the structure of legitimations, limits and sanctions. (p. 134)

Sociologist Herman Gray uses the qualitative research approach in examining racial attitudes reflected in mass media, specifically in television programming. Gray's (1986) poignant article, "Television and the New Black Man: Black Male Images in Prime-Time Situation Comedies," found that one common fictional portrayal of African American males – on The Cosby Show for instance – is one of assimilation and racial harmony. He states,

> The present generation of black male images offers popular legitimation for a narrow and conservative definition of race relations and race interaction. (p. 239)

Mass communication and cultural scholar Christopher P. Campbell (1995) in his book, Race, Myth and the News, presented a textual analysis of racial myths and television news. He notes that "majority culture perceptions (preferred readings) reflected in local television news coverage feed mythological notions about Americans of color – notions that can contribute to contemporary racist attitudes" (p. 3). Campbell concludes,

> When local news ignores life outside of middle-American/dominant culture parameters, it contributes to an understanding of minority cultures as less significant, as marginal…When the news sustains stereotypical notions about nonwhite Americans as less-than-human, as immature, as savages, as derelicts, it feeds an understanding of minorities as different, as "other," as dangerous. (p. 132)

These type images are perpetuated in American society and in media contribute to the contemporary negative stereotype of minorities as associated with black male youth culture known as hip hop.

Another discipline that utilizes ideology and culture is Black Feminist Studies. Cultural critic and black feminist scholar bell hooks presents a compelling analysis of race representation in her book, Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations. Hooks (1994) argues,

> If black folks are to move forward in our struggle for liberation, we must confront the legacy of this unreconciled grief, for it has been the breeding ground for profound nihilistic despair. We must collectively return to a radical political

> vision of social change rooted in a love ethic and seek once again to convert masses of people, black and nonblack. (p. 246)

The dominant ideological view of hip hop culture is rooted in its criminal, misogynistic and capitalist interests. The styles and material culture in hip hop largely contribute to the ideologies of rebellion and identity. Thus, hip hop can provide opportunity for youth to express themselves through their social life experiences.

Hip Hop: A Social Movement?

In social movement discourse, scholars have studied youth culture or resistance by focusing on movements that had national implications such as the Civil Rights Movement. In another discursive context, cultural scholars took a different approach and explored youth subcultures such as hip hop. This chapter takes a cultural approach to critically analyze how hip hop culture encompasses broad social alliances working separately (and sometimes together) for common causes. Thus, these alliances make it possible for supporters to view hip hop as a social movement because of its politics of race, poverty and injustice. Some scholars suggest there is disconnect between the hip hop generation and the civil rights generation of the 1960s. For instance, black popular cultural studies scholar Todd Boyd (2002) in his book The New H.N.I.C. [Head Niggas in Charge]: The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip Hop, argues that "Hip Hop has rejected and now replaced the pious, sanctimonious nature of civil rights as the defining moment of Blackness" (xxi). Boyd suggests that hip hop is a "new way of seeing the world and it is a collective movement that has dethroned civil rights and now commands our undivided attention. The people who form the hip hop generation are the New H.N.I.C. [Head Niggas in Charge]" (p. 13). Young hip hoppers may serve as the

social theorists of the millennial generation, critically analyzing a range of social issues relative to young marginalized Americans. Further, Boyd (2002) criticizes the Civil Rights Movement and its most prominent leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, when he writes, "That civil rights shit is heavy and in no way will work in today's society. You can watch all the reruns of *Eyes on the Prize* that you want, but that day is long gone" (p. xix).

Hip hop culture has proved to be a consistent means of raising political awareness and conveying political ideas to the young, progressive millennial generation. However, I disagree with Boyd in his assessment of hip hop as a greater movement than historical movements such as the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s because the young voting "movement" has yet to demonstrate the depth of its political promise, as demonstrated in the 2004 presidential election. President Bush's re-election is a clear indicator of the lack of "movement" strategies that ended without the goal outcome being met in hip hop culture. Sociologist Debra C. Minkoff (1997) argues that the defining characteristic of a protest cycle is the "rapid and widespread diffusion of protest behavior across a wide variety of groups" (p. 780). This type of diffusion (or lack of) within hip hop culture is critical in shaping outcomes for social change. Since hip hop's agenda for specific social change has not been clearly identified, it can be argued that each hip hop organization and protest group may share common social justice interests but each stands independent of one another.

Across the United States there are smaller community-based organizations and campus organizations that embrace hip hop as a significant cultural influence. There are also countless grassroots nonprofit organizations that have used hip hop as an educational

tool and a mechanism for change such as such as Hip Hop Summit Action Network (HSAN), Hip Hop Congress, Hip Hop Political Convention and the Hip Hop Caucus. However, HSAN has a specific political agenda relative to this study and will be examined as having legitimate cultural significance for because their mission promotes an anti-establishment ideology. Although there are countless organizations with similar missions, HSAN was selected due to its overt political activity, financial infrastructure and its extensive national media exposure.

Hip hop has become the vehicle through which black culture is communicated to audiences within and outside the African-American community. Hip hop has become a more than a music genre. As a so-called "movement," hip hop creates a platform for analytical and philosophical examination of black culture through identification, representation and authenticity.

Sociologist Ralph H. Turner (1969) postulates that social movements deal with misfortunes and injustices. He writes,

> A significant social movement becomes possible when there is a revision in the manner in which a substantial group of people look at some misfortune, seeing it no longer as a misfortune warranting charitable consideration but as an injustice which is intolerable in society. A movement becomes possible when a group of people cease to petition on the good will of others for relief of their misery and demand as their right that others ensure the correction of their condition. (p. 391)

Goldstone (2004) argues that social movements have most often been characterized as "movements of those 'outside the polity' or as 'challenger,' seeking goals that they are unable to pursue through institutionalized politicized political

processes" (p. 334). Jenkins and Klanderman note that social movements "constitute a potential rival to the political representation system" (p. 5). There is a certain expectation of protest action by protest participants, whether it is to empower or to influence behavior of audiences.

Goldstone (2004) suggests that social movement activity and democracy is a "complementary mode of political action, which increases even as democratic politics spread" (p. 336). Such is the case with hip hop culture and its political agenda around social justice issues involving minority groups, particularly African Americans. Goldstone posits that social protest and routine political participation are complementary in four ways. First, "institutional politics, for most ordinary people, is a highly intermittent process, focusing on electoral cycles." This means that protest actions have no end and can continue throughout the years. Second, "most conventional political participation only allows a fairly crude expression of choices; one votes for or against a candidate or party that may have a wide variety of positions" meaning protests can shape party behavior, but when movements have broad goals, a degree of focus is required because movements tend to have broad goals. Third, "protest and associational actions offer an ongoing method to refine and reinforce the results of conventional elections." Depending on which government is in power (leftist or rightist government), protests push that government to make good on their promises. Finally, social movements can "affect elections by not only mobilizing their supporters to vote and support a particular party, but also increasing the salience of issues that are identified with particular parties or politicians" (p. 342). The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s mobilized voters by dramatizing injustices of segregation. Over forty years later, hip hop similarly dramatizes

the injustices of poverty, economic disparity, the lack of healthcare for minorities and unfairness in the legal system as a way to raise the salience of social issues. Thus, hip hop actors (those involved in social change) and activists utilize civil rights strategies – such as participation in nonviolent activities and propaganda – to promote the process of democracy and to confront injustice while forging a social justice agenda.

The following will examine four social situations that hip hop culture faced and addressed between the years 2000-2005. As stated earlier in this chapter, these explicitly challenging social issues were due to devastating structural changes in urban America (Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans), race and language (Don Imus and racial epithets), the promotion of participation in process of democracy (voting and alliances with presidential candidates) and grassroots activities (activism for social justice and policy changes).

Hip Hop and Hurricane Katrina. When Hurricane Katrina, a deadly Category 5 storm, ravaged New Orleans, Louisiana and the Mississippi Gulf Coast in August 2005, no one could have expected the bureaucratic insanity that would follow. Issues of race and poverty would be mainstream topics of discussion for months to come. Public intellectual Dr. Michael Eric Dyson chronicled the African-American suffering in his book, Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster. Dyson (2006) poignantly explains that President George Bush and a white-run system of bureaucracy had failed the minority citizens of New Orleans. He stated,

> But Hurricane Katrina's violent winds and killing waters swept into the mainstream a stark realization: the poor had been abandoned by society and its institutions, and sometimes by their well-off brothers and sisters, long before the

> storm. We are immediately confronted with another unsavory truth: it is the exposure of the extremes, not their existence that stumps our national sense of decency. (p. 2)

While the world viewed shocking images of stranded, hungry, sick and some dead African American and other minority faces on national television, some people were planning fund-raising activities to support Katrina victims. Nonetheless, New Orleans' citizens – whether homeless or business professionals, but mostly African American – were without proper food and care for days. Mainstream media began to refer to the victims of Katrina as refugees instead of evacuees, contributing to the notion that the black poor were un-American and unimportant. A cynic might wonder why these "refugees" did not seek cover and that their failure to evacuate in a timely manner resulted in their own demise. The reality is that poor planning on local government's behalf and the lack of federal resources and information contributed to the bureaucratic failures, which cast a long shadow on the Bush Administration.

Amy Goodman of DemocracyNow, a daily TV/radio news program, was one of many journalists who reported that superstar rapper Kanye West declared on a live broadcast that was run on NBC, MSNBC, and CNBC that "George Bush doesn't care about black people" (September 5, 2005). West was one of several singers and celebrities participating in a live telethon and concert produced by NBC News titled "A Concert for Hurricane Relief." West was not scheduled to perform, however. West was paired with comedian Mike Myers and read from a prepared script. The segment began with Myers speaking about the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the Mississippi

Gulf Coast. Then Kanye West took the opportunity to depart from the script to criticize the leader of the free world by calling him a racist on national television. He said,

> I hate the way they portray us in the media. If you see a black family, it says they're looting. See a white family, it says they're looking for food. And you know that it's been five days, because most of the people are black. And even for me to complain about it, I would be a hypocrite because I've tried to turn away from the TV, because it's too hard to watch. We already realize a lot of people that could help are at war right now, fighting another way, and they have given them permission to go down and shoot us…George Bush doesn't care about black people. (September 5, 2005)

That rallying cry was heard around the world. West's words echoed what many people were thinking. The government's lack of response led some Southern rappers (Master P, David Banner and others) to take immediate action and organize benefit concerts to support Katrina victims. Others chronicled the devastation in different ways. For instance, director and co-producer Spike Lee developed a documentary film entitled When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts that serves as a powerful testimony to the catastrophe. This was the only documentary film that chronicled testimonies of victims, offered heart-wrenching footage of loss, anger, death and real-life stories of what happens to blacks and other minorities when the "system" fails and nobody cares. Novelist and founder of Film Quarterly Ernest Callenbach (2006) summed up Spike Lee's vision for the film as a "people's-eye view of the disaster" that examines the bureaucratic mess that New Orleans residents found themselves in (p. 6). He wrote,

> Neither people nor governments in New Orleans…or Washington DC were ready for the scope and suddenness of the Katrina flooding. When the inundation came, virtually everything that could go wrong, did. It was a massive failure of preparation, communication, authority, initiative, and human concern. (p. 8)

The hip hop community made attempts to combat President Bush's lack of concern and FEMA's lack of a systemic protocol for a disaster of this magnitude. Mainstream media focused on efforts by well-known celebrities such as Harry Connick, Jr., Sean Penn, John Travolta and other white well-known celebrities. Eventually, African-American media giant Oprah Winfrey's efforts would be publicized. There were, however, other celebrities (in this case rappers) who where organizing relief efforts that did not garner mainstream media coverage. For instance, Myers and Reid (2005) reported on MTV that Mississippi native and rapper David Banner organized a benefit concert in Atlanta, Georgia with hip hop heavyweights such as Lil' Jon, T.I., 8Ball and MJG, Kinfolk (Ali from the St. Lunatics and Big Gipp from Goodie Mobb), Boyz N Da Hood, Chopper from MTV's "Making the Band," 112, Lyfe Jennings, D4L and others. According Banner, the concert would benefit the Mississippi-based Heal the Hood Foundation, which provides assistance to the nation's poorest neighborhoods. Banner, backstage at ReActNow Music & Relief Special on MTV, said,

> I'm from Mississippi ... people in Atlanta, in Houston, Lafayette Louisiana, we have no choice, we live in these places, we couldn't walk away from it if we wanted to. We can't turn off the TV and it goes away. It's our responsibility (Myers and Reid, 2005).

Banner was honored by the National Black Caucus for his Hurricane Katrina relief efforts. He was presented with the organization's Visionary Award at a ceremony in Jackson, Mississippi for "his contributions and efforts in helping to raise millions of dollars in relief funds for victims of Hurricane Katrina" (Roberts, December 3, 2006). Another rapper-turned-entrepreneur, Percy Miller (aka Master P) is known for giving back to his community in New Orleans. According to Ebony magazine, Master P, founder of P. Miller Enterprises and No Limit Entertainment, was reared in one of New Orleans' projects (Calliope Housing Development). He donated "thousands of dollars to his elementary school in New Orleans and his RescueOne organization delivered tons of clothing and household products to Hurricane Katrina survivors" (June 2008, p. 128). While there were numerous instances where contributions were made to the relief and recovery efforts of Katrina, these particular rappers were used because of their close ties to Mississippi and New Orleans. These kinds of efforts were indicative of the celebrity climate of African American philanthropy following what is possibly the United States' worst natural disaster.

In summary, the imprint of the power of rap music lies between the extremes of gangsta and *conscious* rap images, with advocacy serving as the pendulum that swings in both directions. I argue that the government's documented slow response to the Katrina disaster is a form of oppression because the victims in this case were mainly black citizens. This oppression led fellow rappers to come together to promote goodwill and humanity for the effected mainly black citizens of New Orleans and residents of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Even on a limited scale, their efforts are a great example of hip hop advocating for marginalized citizens in America as juxtaposed to hip hop culture's

negative image of misogyny and violence. The rappers' philanthropic efforts to support Katrina's victims signify what cultural scholar Stuart Hall (1997) calls "representation." Hall suggests that representation is a complex process that "enables us to *refer* to either the 'real' world of objects, people or events" (p. 17). Thus, the real world "event" of Hurricane Katrina and the slow response by the government at all levels served as a historical "sign" demonstrating how minorities in this country can be (or have been) ignored on many levels for extended periods of time. The devastation of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005 presented opportunity for some rappers to take action to step in where the bureaucratic system failed, which was as the heart of "meaning" or cultural understanding for minorities due to unfair treatment in this country. In semiotics terms the "sign" that minorities were not a priority or, in other words, irrelevant after the Katrina devastation rang true for victims of the disaster when thousands of mostly black faces were left stranded for days and weeks following the hurricane. Many victims have yet to recover three years after Katrina.

Don Imus, Race and Language. "Nappy headed hos." Those three racist words used by 66-year old national radio talk show host Don Imus resonated with black folk and the American public, resulting in a firestorm of controversy. With those words from the mouth of a white man in the 21st century, it was evident that something as profound as a public scalp in retaliation was required. Activists like the Reverend Al Sharpton, of the National Action Network, led the charge. The majority African American (eight black and two white) female basketball team would, for a short time, be thrust into a national debate regarding racist language, causing America to become introspective as it confronted issues of race matters in this country. The next flashpoint to be on the African

American's agenda was to confront Imus and challenge his sponsors and his networks. Activists such as Reverend Al Sharpton, known as a "megaphone for the voiceless and an advocate for those in need" (National Action Network, 2007) led a coalition of public figures, which ultimately led to Imus' firing. Reverend Sharpton, the president of the National Action Network (NAN) (2007), uses activism and advocacy as a way to "represent" for marginalized citizens. According to the NAN Web site, Reverend Sharpton has had "an irrefutable impact on national politics because of his strong commitment to equality and progressive politics" (www.nationalactionnetwork.net, 2007). Further, he led the charge against the "prevalence of pejorative and racial slurs in the mainstream media and music industry" following the Imus firing. In the June 2007 edition of EBONY, journalist Roland Martin (2007) noted that Don Imus made the fatal mistake that many do. He said, "When you aren't part of a certain group, you can get in trouble for saying the wrong thing" (p. 80).

In our society, it can be argued that we operate under a double standard when it comes to race and language. Cora Daniels (2007) author of Ghettonation: A Journey into the Land of Bling and Home of the Shameless, was quoted in same magazine stating "where Imus erred was in not realizing the setting he was in, and by his 'trying to use bad behavior for bad behavior' (p. 82). African American female billionaire, Oprah Winfrey, who holds the top rank in television talk shows, dedicated three episodes to discussing demeaning language and racial epithets in hip hop with top African-American music industry executives, journalists, the co-chairs of the Hip Hop Summit Action Network, a CBS board member and other well-known celebrity types. On The Oprah Winfrey Show (2007) former NAACP president and CBS board of directors member, Bruce Gordon,

said that Imus' behavior was "intolerable, and it would not be accepted. An extreme statement like his required an extreme response" (quoted on Oprah.com, April 16).

On the other hand, Jason Whitlock, the African American award-winning newspaper columnist with the Kansas City Star in Kansas City, Missouri, was the least critical of Don Imus stating that "Our real problem is that we're not willing to accept responsibility for our role in this [problem]" (quoted on Oprah.com, April 16, 2007). Whitlock's examination of the negativity of hip hop culture further legitimizes that African Americans are not only divided when it comes to social issues that impact black men and women in America, but that a double standard exists in the black community. That double standard includes blacks having disrespect for each other, particularly men against women. Journalist Jason Whitlock's assessment of the cultural divide is that,

> We've allowed our kids to adopt a hip-hop culture that's been perverted and corrupted by prison values. They are defining our women in pop culture as bitches and hos. ...We are defining ourselves. Then, we get upset and want to hold Don Imus to a higher standard than we hold ourselves to. That is unacceptable. (quoted on Oprah.com, April 16, 2007)

Whitlock is on point when he makes the analogy of holding Imus to a higher standard than blacks hold themselves. The drama caused by Imus' use of racist, sexist language stirred emotions in popular culture because the n-word is so commonly used in black culture. I argue that the issue of race-based language is problematic. There are two issues here. First, Imus used words that that many rappers use to label African American women. Ironically, it is a part of our culture, even if it is inappropriate. After all, much of rap music is laced with sexist and racist language that demeans women and promotes

materialism. Second, it can be argued that the First Amendment gives Imus the right to express himself. I argue that Imus' First Amendment rights are challenged when using federally-regulated commercial airwaves to spread his venom. The July 2007 issue of EBONY is focused on what the magazine calls "a culture of disrespect" (p. 82). The cover, traditionally graced with celebrity faces, used words as art. Covered in black with the words "Who you calling a .....?" written in white text, was designed to grab the reader's attention. The word "you" written in bright red indicating the message is targeted at the reader. The omitted word could be a number of disparaging word choices such as "nigga" or "bitch" or "ho" (slang for whore). To the magazine's target audience, who are mainly African Americans, the missing word could easily represent any one of the aforementioned. This is in part because the rhetorical question "Who you calling a ....?" is one that African Americans have blatantly asked when confronted with racist and sexist language toward people of color and women. What is ironic about the title of this "special issue" is the need for the reader to fill in the blank. Since this was an issue that focused on the culture of disrespect and the use of disparaging language in black culture, it would have been fitting to not allow the reader to fill in the void, but to boldly print the word and face the vile language that permeates American culture and not allow readers to fill in the blank. I argue that the magazine tackled an issue of race and language yet failed to print the word that they dedicated an entire issue to. EBONY magazine's editorial director, Bryan Monroe (2007), explains why the magazine limits its use of the N-word and other derogatory language by stating,

> A few months ago we committed to avoiding the N-word and other disparaging language in the pages of this magazine, except in times of significant importance.

> This is one of those times. But I promise that the language will be used sparingly, not just for punctuation, but because it is critical to making a central point, amplifying a significant theme. But, you be the judge. (p. 63)

The word nigga is political. The words bitch and ho are political. Such is the case with rap music and its language that makes it controversial to some and palatable to others. In the larger context, hip hop is woven into the fabric of American culture and has global significance. The politics of the genre ebbs and flows, depending on controversy, race, sex, materialism, social injustices, marketing, branding and many other factors that contribute to the complexity of the subculture known as hip hop.

As part of the momentum in the discussion of race matters on a national scale, the role of the music industry in public affairs led some rappers and producers to address Congress on September 25, 2007 to argue that hip hop mirrors what's going on in society. According to New York Post writer Brian Garrity (2007), industry executives Viacom Chief Executive Philippe Dauman, Universal Music Group CEO Doug Morris, Warner Music Group CEO Edgar Bronfman Jr., and Radio One CEO Alfred Liggins were on the defensive before the House Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection, chaired by Bobby Rush (D-Ill.), to answer questions about sexist and racially charged lyrics in hip hop. Rappers Master P (aka Percy Miller) and David Banner (aka Levell Crump), who were also summoned before the House, had differences of opinions on the situation. Master P apologized for his past use of offensive language in music, but David Banner stood firmly on the notion that hip hop is misunderstood and is unfairly scrutinized, stating, "Hip-hop is sick because America is sick" (Garrity, September 26, 2007). I conclude that in the context of interpreting black culture, hip hop

may not be as easily understood as many may think. Dyson's (2007) profound interpretation of black culture and hip hop resonates:

> It's not simply a question of the mastery of a set of ideas associated with the interpretation or appraisal of black life and art. It's also the power to shape a lens through which this culture is interpreted, and is seen as legitimate, or viable, or desirable, or real, by the dominant culture. (p. 4)

Hip hop and Presidential Elections. Politicians know the power of hip hop. In particular, presidential hopefuls in the 2004 and 2008 elections used hip hop as a tool for political discourse by either using grassroots efforts to mobilize young people to pursue democracy or by aligning themselves with hip hop heavyweights as a way to tap into the youth market. Presidential hopefuls in the 2004 election and in the upcoming 2008 campaign aligned themselves with two trailblazers – Barack Obama, seeking to be the nation's first black president, and Hillary Rhodam Clinton, the second woman to run on a major party presidential ticket since Geraldine Ferraro in 1984 – participants in an historic event in their campaigns for the highest ranking elected position in America.

While there is no body of research documenting when rap artists first aligned themselves with presidential campaigns, there is evidence that hip hop superstars mounted campaigns for candidates in the 2004 presidential election. Further evidence is documented leading up to the 2008 presidential election. The unanswered question, however, is "Do political endorsements matter?" According to a 2002 study by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, younger blacks (ages 18-25) were six times (24 percent versus four percent) more likely than those ages 51-64 to say a reason not to vote is because of the lack of good candidates. The Joint Center in 2007 surveyed 750

black "likely primary/caucus voters" in an effort to determine their views on national problems, issues in the presidential campaign and candidates for both the Democratic and Republican presidential nominations. The 2007 National Survey of Likely Black Presidential Primary Voters found that 28 percent identified the Iraq war as the single most important problem in the country, followed by healthcare (20 percent), the economy (15 percent) and education (10 percent). The Center reports that a pre-2004 election survey of black unlikely voters (31 percent) identified the single most important problem in the country as jobs and the economy (www.jointcenter.org). When considering rap lyrics and the themes that emerge as a result of the conditions that rappers rap about, the pre-2004 election results are more in line with the context of the political messages found in rap music.

One organization in particular challenged political speech and its freedoms and took a political stand for the entertainment community. Rock the Vote, a non-profit, non-partisan organization founded in 1990 in response to a wave of attacks on freedom of speech and artistic expression, says that it "engages youth in the political process by incorporating the entertainment community and youth culture into its activities. From actors to musicians, comedians to athletes, Rock the Vote harnesses cutting-edge trends and pop culture to make political participation cool" (rockthevote.org, 2007).

The following graphic, taken from the Rock the Vote Web site, (www.rockthevote.org) represents the organization's first campaign against censorship. "Censorship is UnAmerican," first debuted in 1990.

Figure 1. Rock the Vote's first educational campaign image: Censorship is UnAmerican campaign.

Obtained from rockthevote.org web site, (n.p.).

On a denotative level, the interpretation of this graphic is that to compromise anyone's freedom of speech in the free world is ludicrous. On a connotative level, the visual image of "Uncle Sam" extending his obviously "white" hand over the mouth of what appears to be an African American or some other dark-skinned minority, represents how the "the establishment" exerts control and in the essence of American tradition, seek to silence the voices of the oppressed.

Adam Howard (2005) in his article "Hip-Hop Voting Bloc?" avers that hip hop culture has "proved to be a very effective means of conveying political ideas to young people" (thenation.com, August 21). For instance, in the 2004 presidential election Sean "Diddy" Combs and Citizen Change worked with democratic presidential hopeful Massachusetts Senator John Kerry to organize the 'Vote or Die!' campaign to get the younger population to vote. Hip hop historian Jeff Chang in his analysis of hip hop and activism, points out,

> Even moguls such as Jay-Z, Simmons, and Sean "P. Diddy" Combs have thrown their weight behind voter outreach. And while the results are hard to track case by

> case, one massive shift is undeniable: In 2004, half of the 4 million new voters under 30 were people of color—a demographic watershed largely overlooked by the media. (Chang, 2007)

Most recently, Illinois Senator and United States Democratic presidential hopeful, Barack Obama, a bi-racial man of African and Caucasian heritage, aligned himself with well-known progressive, *conscious* rappers Talib Kweli and Common. A strategic opportunity for Obama's camp, these *conscious* or sometimes called *conscientious* rappers are among the most recognized artists with positive messages in their music. Both artists feature Obama in their lyrics. Common, in his song "The People," celebrates Obama with, "My raps ignite the people like Obama." In addition, Common is part of a YouTube video that has emerged in support of Obama in the online community. The homepage of votehope2008.org introduces the embedded video with a banner that reads, "Common is voting for Obama. Are you?" Talib Kweli's song "Say Something" makes reference to Obama's powerful oratory skills and insightful message when he says, "Speak to the people like Barack Obama." Ironically, Kweli, who is not known to be active in voting, speaks up for presidential hopeful, Obama, in his 2007 album, *Ear Drum.*

With his roots in the gangsta genre of rap music, Tracy Marrow, better known as West Coast gangster rapper Ice-T, endorsed Barack Obama during his 2008 keynote lecture at Kansas State College honoring the legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The rapper-turned-actor was at the center of controversy in 1992 when he and his band, Body Count, released "Cop Killer," a controversial rap song with anti-establishment messages regarding corrupt police and police brutality.

No one candidate in the 2008 presidential race has gained full support of the entire hip hop community. For instance, in the 2008 presidential primaries was divisiveness within the Democratic Party and along party lines. Obama's democratic opponent was former First Lady and New York Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton. The Republican candidate was Senator John McCain. One of Forbes "Hip Hop Kings" and gangster rapper was in support of Senator Clinton. Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson, a rapper who glorifies violence and misogyny, openly endorsed Hilary Clinton. MTV writer Garth Bardsley (2007), in his article on celebrities and political endorsements, said

> On "The O'Reilly Factor" Monday night, Bill O'Reilly showed footage of 50 Cent giving his endorsement to Hillary Clinton. "I just think she could do a good job," said the rapper, who added that he has nothing against Barack Obama but thinks America isn't ready for an African-American president. "I think they might kill him. (February 5.)

These artists are just a few of the hip hop artists that have emerged in support of presidential candidates in the last year. Endorsees, however, must beware due to the fact that celebrity endorsements can backfire. Such is the case with former First Lady Hillary Clinton who was labeled a "hypocrite" for accepting donations raised by hip hop composer, producer and artist Timothy "Timbaland" Mosley. The rap titan, whose lyrics are peppered with "bitch," "ho" and other words that demean women, hosted the $1,000-a head fund-raiser for the Senator (Zeller, 2007, n.p.).

Even though rappers and other celebrities align themselves with presidential candidates and support other political activities, it is hardly sufficient to accept their actions or views as representative of all minorities and young Americans. I argue that hip

hop superstars blur the lines between credibility and accountability. While taking a political stance is admirable, there is no direct link between a rapper's endorsement of a political candidate and an increase in youth voting. Hip hop's key audiences are a new generation of young, independent thinkers whose parents are largely products of the civil rights era.

I argue that hip hop has made inroads in the black community but has not radically changed the social or economic landscape for minorities in this country. The hip hop generation has not organized itself to make radical changes near the level of successful movements like the Civil Rights Movement, Women's Rights Movement, and others. In addition, hip hop has not organized itself to be able to demonstrate substantive organizing for social change like successful grassroots organizers like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and others. What it has done is create a forum to engage people in dialogue about race, class and economic disadvantages and brought awareness to the ideologies of a counterculture and the commodification of that culture due to white media institutions of power. Further, it brought a worldview to youth rebellion in a post-civil rights era and entered the political sphere by bringing attention to the inner city black struggle beyond the Old South desegregation era of the 1960s and late 1970s. According to hip hop historian Jeff Chang (2005), the post-civil rights generation raises a vexing question of "Who will be our leaders?" (p. 268). He notes that hip hoppers "embraced the ideas of the exiled and martyred icons of the past while rejecting the legitimacy of their elders" (p. 269).

Hip Hop and Grassroots Activism. There is no question that hip hop is an international popular phenomenon. Around the world hip hop's influence is seen in art, fashion, music, advertising, television, film and on college campuses. Its influence is also visible in politics. While hip hop culture has essentially remained apolitical, there is evidence that are nonprofit organizations that seek to empower America's youth through planned, organized activist efforts mainly situated in large cities.

In hip hop culture there is a consistent theme of resistance woven in music lyrics and by activists who use hip hop to push a political agenda. For instance, there are numerous organizations, community organizers and leaders, individuals, religious leaders such as Rev. Al Sharpton, wealthy African American hip hop influencers such as Russell Simmons, Sean "Diddy" Combs and many others who protest a multiplicity of social issues ranging from economic oppression, global racism, education, injustice, police brutality, the degradation of women and other social ills. Their activist efforts breathe life into the political realm of hip hop.

This study identified Hip Hop Summit Action Network (HSAN), a national nonprofit organization that promotes hip hop as a social force that seek to empower minorities to do self-examinations to make radical changes that reflect black positivism and contribute to discourse in black culture. While there are countless smaller hip hop organizations in the public sphere, the current study specifically focused on HSAN, one of the most innovative organizations to use hip hop as a political tool. HSAN is run by hip hop music mogul and entrepreneur Russell Simmons, who serves as the chairman and is managed by civil rights veteran Dr. Ben Chavis, who serves as the organization's president and chief executive officer. The organization began in 2001 and is "dedicated to

harnessing the cultural relevance of Hip-Hop music to serve as a catalyst for education advocacy and other societal concerns fundamental to the empowerment of youth" (hsan.org, 2008). The organization defines itself as a "non-profit, non-partisan national coalition of Hip-Hop artists, entertainment industry leaders, education advocates, civil rights proponents, and youth leaders united in the belief that Hip-Hop is an enormously influential agent for social change which must be responsibly and proactively utilized to fight the war on poverty and injustice" (hsan.org).

HSAN was developed in 2001 and boasts an aggressive socially political agenda to "foster initiatives aimed at engaging the Hip-Hop generation in community development issues related to equal access to high quality public education and literacy, freedom of speech, voter education, economic advancement, and youth leadership development" (hsan.org, 2008). On their Web site, HSAN listed its impressive record of "programmatic accomplishments" that include: sponsoring more than 40 successful hip hop summits in mainly largely populated urban cities such as New York, Los Angeles, Detroit, Atlanta, Washington, D.C.; by registering thousands of new young voters at various events; established alliances with established civil rights organizations such as the NAACP, National Urban League, Southern Christian Leadership Conference and others; and defended Hip-Hop culture before members of the U.S. Congress and before federal regulatory agencies such as the Federal Trade Commission and the Federal Communications Commission.

Considering hip hop leaders are increasingly concerned with oppressive institutionalized struggles, advocating against social injustices is one way of trying to break down barriers of oppression and depression within black culture through collective

action. Black feminist scholar bell hooks (1995) suggest that as black people make sacrifices and "multiple choices depending on our circumstances. Ultimately, depth of political commitment to progressive social change informs our will to sacrifice" (p. 236). Moreover, hooks (1995) poignantly states that "contemporary struggle for civil rights and black liberation in the United States has continually affirmed the importance of identity" (p. 240).

Sociologists Jo Reger (2007) notes that one way to articulate a movement's ideology is "through the use of emotions," suggesting that emotional appeals draw people in and shape potential participants' understanding of movement goals (p. 1353). In addition, Reger (2007) posits that when emotional appeals lack leadership, the movement can be ineffective. She states,

> When this emotional mobilization is accomplished without strategic guidance of leadership or widespread mobilization, the movement can remain submerged, invisible on the national scene and emerging only in various community contexts. (p. 1353)

In articulating contemporary leadership in hip hop culture, one issue at hand with hip hop culture is the absence of leadership representing a collective identity outside the music genre. There's no question that Russell Simmons' HSAN is a shining example of hard work and organized social agenda planning. However, identifying a political leader in hip hop or to name one influential person as a leader in the so-called hip hop movement is difficult. It is also difficult to identify specific collaborative outreach efforts that could potentially impact African Americans and other minority groups outside the urban landscape, which is where most activist efforts are targeted. This could impact the larger

social structure, the larger political scene and the emotional mobilization required to have a presence on a national level (Reger, 2007).

Conclusion

In its more specific ideological form, hip hop serves as a musical movement for entertainment purposes and less as a documented movement for social justice. This study demonstrates that hip hop cannot stand alone as a separate movement, but is organized loosely as an extension of the work of leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. The politics of the millennial generation may borrow characteristics from previous movements like the Feminist Movement or the Civil Rights Movement, but each generation responded to the contexts of the time. This is not to say that hip hop has a lesser social agenda or that "hip hop is dead," as rapper Nasir "Nas" Jones so eloquently titled his controversial 2006 rap album. What is clear, however, is that hip hop lacks one cohesive agenda and one true leader that communicates one message of resistance or empowerment that translates into what some writers have coined as a hip hop "movement" or, more appropriately, a force in fostering social justice. I argue that no single monolithic issue has been identified in hip hop culture. Sociologist Debra C. Minkoff (1997) postulate that protest engenders activism by others under favorable political conditions. In that vein, hip hop activism boasts an established stream of support from organizations that arise to use hip hop as a catalyst for social justice and social change. This all ties back into the overall complex notion that hip hop is its own social movement. Each of these aforementioned cases indicate that worthwhile work is being done, but what is not clear is what leader decided hip hop's political agenda? In fact, it is not clear just what hip hop's primary political agenda may be. Further, what group or leader is the most identifiable among hip hoppers

as the political voice that connects all emerging and existing hip hop culture together to reach a common goal? Hip hop historian Jeff Chang's question "Who will be our leaders?" is a valid one that could not be identified by this study and will require further examination by scholars in future works. Therefore, the argument that hip hop is a social movement doesn't hold up. Not since the civil rights movement has there been a movement about race relations, humanity, equal justice and civil rights for all people.

I believe the hip hop generation benefits greatly from the success of the civil rights movement and other movements that preceded it. Yet, the lack of cohesive movement strategies as a whole, among various organizations and individuals involved in black politics and hip hop, contributes to the notion that hip hop is a powerful cultural force on the one hand and a loosely organized political machine on the other.
This analysis only serves to reinforce that a social movement is a process, which requires understanding throughout its cycle of evolutionary activities and requires a tremendous amount of tangible, organized people resources. It is one thing to have a movement where human rights are advocated and national policy is changed to impact American citizens. It is another to understand the environmental conditions that led to that activism in the first place. Hip hop's activism involves people resources, but no one person is leading the charge that is outside the entertainment realm. Simply put, rappers, entertainers and celebrities are not politicians that can lead the charge to identify and attack social justice issues. The millennial generation is part of a cultural phenomenon who is trying to figure out how to step outside a culture of misogyny and materialism into a political sphere where overt substantive action can lead to social justice for marginalized minorities.

So to address the title of this chapter, Hip Hop is Dead?, it can be analyzed in a couple ways. First, because hip hop's political impact has yet to be quantified using empirical data, it can be assumed that hip hop has no lifeline or success story when it comes to measurable outcomes regarding social justice issues. If you examine previous research on hip hop and the rap genre, you will find a plethora of information on a sexist and materialistic culture. Second, if you look at the ongoing work among various organizations and individuals who utilize hip hop as a tool for political discourse, then hip hop in the political arena is not dead, but perhaps loosely organized and hasn't found its niche (through the media and other outlets) to garner enough positive awareness that its audiences view it as a cultural phenomenon instead of a cultural disgrace. Hip hop as a social movement is perhaps best described as an emerging youth movement that operates more on a local level – hence within various communities throughout the U.S. – than on a national level with one strategic agenda, one identifiable leader and one national organization that supports a clearly identifiable mission that ultimately impacts the local communities. Hip hop in the larger context has no leader and until one emerges from what marketers call the "hip hop generation" that has no affiliation as rap moguls or entertainers, then hip hop will continue to be defined in media and popular culture as an entertainment venue instead of a social movement. Therefore, while hip hop struggles to become legitimized as a revolutionary movement, the efforts of those individuals and various organizations whose work targets and impacts marginalized citizens cannot go unnoticed. Sociologist Irving Louis Horowitz's (1970) assessment of urban violence and the anti-war movement can be used to sum up why hip hop's transformative power should not be under-emphasized. He writes,

> The size of the undertaking should not be minimized. The tasks of majority interests are connected not only with the need for responsible criticism but, more significantly, with the preparation for responsible leadership—the direction of large numbers of people representing different social forces and political moorings. For such a role, many of the virtues of the "old revolutionary" are in desperate demand and short supply: self-sacrifice, dedication to principle, singleness of purpose. (p. 82)

The next chapter will use *textual analysis* to examine music lyrics from specific contemporary rappers (chart-topping and underground artists) whose music has been identified as having strong political implications.

CHAPTER IV

REALITY RAP: PERFORMING BLACK POLITICS

> Hip-hop, once vibrant, edgy, fresh and def, is now as materialistic, hedonistic, misogynistic, shallow and violent as some of the films and TV shows launched from Hollywood.
>
> - Kevin Powell (2000, p. 66)

The above quote by hip hop analyst Kevin Powell may explain why a handful of rappers take a more political stance for humanity and rap about current events in their music rather than succumb to the materialistic and misogynistic mores that have been covered extensively in academia. According to Perkins (1996) rap music has morphed into various sub-genres in the last thirty years including, but not limited to, Black Nationalist rap, gangsta rap, female rap, alternative or political (conscious) rap and pop rap. These various types of rap music each contribute to a dominant art form and subculture of hip hop that one of the genre's leading scholars, Tricia Rose (1994), describes as "a form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music" (p. 2).

In this chapter, I place the work of cultural creators (e.g. the *conscious* rapper) in dialogue with journalists, political observers, academic theorists, hip hop historians and others who are critical of hip hop culture. I particularly emphasize black cultural expression, social identity and social ills in the early 21st century that contribute to the politics within the African American community. *Blackness* and *representation*, in this

study, are used to describe discursive work that African Americans use to signify social meanings and cultural practices. *Textual analysis* will be used in this chapter to examine media texts, specifically rap music and musicians who are the producers of the texts. Also, the social contexts in which the lyrics are written provide insight in the examination of the text. This chapter will also focus specifically on the sub-genre known as *conscious* rap, but will utilize various gangsta rap artists who have taken the liberty to include a song with politically-tinged lyrics on their respective rap albums.

The lyrics of the millennial generation of socially-conscious rappers such as Dead Prez, Talib Kweli, Mos Def, Common and Kanye West and other hip hop artists offer powerful critiques and analyses of contemporary social ills because they speak mainly of current events, revolution, rebellion and empowerment. These rappers examine a variety of issues such as racism, economic conflicts, the practice of democracy (voting), police brutality, black politics, the absence of the black father, healthy relationships (or lack of) between black men and women and disparaging language (nigger, nappy headed hos, etc.) in hip hop culture. They also bring a community ethos to how we treat African American people. Further, they provide useful points of entry for considering why they create music that galvanizes people's attention. The encounters between black music and black politics provide context of intellectual and cultural dialogue in hip hop culture, particularly with its reemergence in the early 21st century and its prominence as a commodified and commercialized art form. In fact, by the year 2000, the Recording Industry Association of America reported that hip hop was the second most popular musical trend in the United States (www.riaa.com). Hip hop's popularity provides a unique opportunity for savvy political rappers to frame their political messages of

ideology and rebellion against the society's ills. Further, hip hop as a culture contributes to the notion that rappers understand the politics of their environment and the social issues that surround it.

Although hip hop has a rich history with many elements that can be explored, previous milestones within the cultural art form will not be utilized as a chronological account of its cultural development as whole. However, a brief history of rap music's connection to other genres of music produced and performed by African Americans will provide context for the examination of protest songs and black cultural expression in contemporary times. According to communication scholars, rap artists are gifted storytellers and cultural historians, similar to African griots (Cummings & Roy, 2002; Smitherman 1997). Nathan Abrams (1992) in the article "Antonio's B-boys: Rap, Rappers, and Gramsci's Intellectuals," suggest that rappers are "organic intellectuals...who consciously and explicitly claim to speak for their communities" (p. 1).

In the African American community music is rooted in older cultural traditions and has traditionally been used to signify struggle and communicate political messages. Rybacki and Rybacki (1990) suggest that "dissident groups and individuals have used music as a means of expressing their discontent" (p. 278). Historically, music has served as a conduit to articulate and communicate some type of struggle. As generations evolve so does the struggle and changes occur based on the politics of the time, which is represented in the decline of one genre and the rise and popularity of another genre. For instance, Lull (1992) suggests that changes in contemporary music include the decline of rock music and the emergence of rap music that resonates with young Americans. He

determined that rap music is "political at many levels" (p. 9). American black music is multidimensional, comprised on several levels of meaning and interpretation. For instance, The American civil rights movement is an excellent example of the complex relationship between culture, politics and bridging the gap between the past and the present through political songs. "We Shall Overcome" can be referred to as the anthem of the Civil Rights Movement and provides an illustrative example of a song with a social purpose and gospel roots that is tied to the movement of the 1960s. In his book, Protest and Praise, Spencer (1992) notes that the song can be traced to two gospel hymns that have been welded together, "I'll Be All Right" and "I'll Overcome Someday" (p. 84). These two songs, according to Eyerman (2002), "could contain coded political messages, even as they were written down and sold as sheet music and sung in churches and parlors at the turn of the last century" (p. 447). In the 20th century, real human issues would be the catalyst for a plethora of protest music across genres including blues and jazz of the 1930s-50s, rock 'n' roll in the 1960s and 1970s and rap music in the 1980s and a resurgence of political rap in the early 21st century. Historically, the blues was a mechanism for self expression like rap music is for today's youth. Rap music, like other forms of black music that preceded it (jazz, blues, soul, funk, etc.) also has similarities to the blues because it too has roots in the lower-class African-American community and it offers a male-dominated perspective (Armstrong, p. 192). Dyson (1996) suggests that the "blues functioned for another generation of blacks similarly to the way rap functions for young blacks today" (p. 18). Popular culture scholar Michael Bernard-Donals, in his analysis of jazz, rock 'n' roll, rap and politics notes that in the 1930s, jazz moved from a marginal musical form to something of an industry (p. 127). Jazz had its roots in African

American churches and in night clubs but would become the music of "intellectuals" that would come in and out of style. It eventually became an art form associated with upward mobility for its African American performers (Lionel Hampton, Cab Calloway and others) and was popular in large cities. With white band leaders taking notice, the genre became a "hybridized jazz culture" or "whitened" version of African American music that people could dance to and one that white people would listen to (p. 127-28). Artists like world-renown jazz singer Nina Simone used modern jazz for more than entertaining. She used jazz as a vehicle for communicating social issues and creating dialogue about political events of the time. Songs and texts embedded with political meaning typically signify a global symbol of political struggle. For example, Simone realized what it was like to be black in America in the 1960s and wrote about it in her song "Mississippi Goddam." Simone, an African American singer, songwriter and pianist blended jazz, blues, gospel and classical music to create a distinctive sound. "Mississippi Goddam" would be her "first civil rights song" and was written shortly after the 1963 deaths of four African American girls in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama. Historian Ruth Feldstein (2005) noted the song's lyrics were "filled with anger and despair and stood in stark contrast to the fast-paced and rollicking rhythm" (p. 1349). Feldstein posits that Simone challenged principles that "are still strongly associated with liberal civil rights activism" when she sang:

> All I want is equality
>
> For my sister, my brother, my people, and me.
>
> Yes, you lied to me all these years…
>
> But this whole country is full of lies

You're all gonna die and die like flies

I don't trust you anymore. (p. 1350)

The controversial art form known as rap music would essentially have a similar impact with its popularity in mainstream arenas in the latter part of the 20th century and continuing today. Unlike other musical genres, rap music had in its earlier development, and still has now (including the *conscious* message), an autobiographical style, with lyrics reflecting life in the inner city and social conditions for minorities, reflective of current social ills in society.

Rap as Protest Music

Rap music transitioned from a marginalized art form by and about African Americans to a genre with global implications and significance. The hip hop culture in the early 21st century provides an excellent framework for examining the millennial youth generation and politics. In the academy, much of the research on hip hop has centered on rap and its link to criminality and violence among blacks, ghetto-conditions, misogyny and negative images of women in music and videos. This research is important in that it contributes to a new body of literature regarding the politics within hip hop culture and "political message" rap music.

When hip hop began in the South Bronx in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was akin to a social movement, largely created by African Americans for African Americans. The largest sub-genre to evolve from this movement was *rap* music. Hip hop as a culture reflected black youth perspectives and serves as what black popular culture scholar Halifu Osumare calls "a global signifier for many forms of marginalizations" (p. 173). These perspectives would evolve and eventually attract outside audiences that represent

the dominant paradigm or "white" mainstream and give rise to broader commercialization of the genre. Further, as hip hop culture progressed, so did its politics. Hip hop's politics in the late 1970s were initially focused on stylistic traditions. By the 1980s, hip hop remained essentially dance music. However, the politics shifted to inner city gang violence and issues of race, poverty and social conflicts. By the mid 1980s protest lyrics were common in rap (Neal, 2004). Groups like Public Enemy used socio-political content as a form of protesting against the establishment with songs such as "Fight the Power." The 1990s ushered in the hardcore/gangsta rap genre with a straightforward polemic that brought immediate attention to the collective identity of marginalized Americans. Specifically, Ice-T's "Cop Killer" and N.W.A.'s (Niggaz Wit Attitudes) "Fuck the Police!" resulted in national media attention and a community outcry from political figures, law enforcement and others for their direct anti-establishment attitudes toward "the system" and a disregard for corrupt police and their "laws." Political rap songs continued to be developed, such as Public Enemy's "By the Time I Get to Arizona" which challenged Arizona's governor for failing to make Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday a state holiday. Nonetheless, the "gangsta" rap genre has perhaps received the most criticism from media and has been explored extensively in academia.

While politics is part of hip hop's rich history, there are particular songs that link culture and black politics together for the listening audience. That audience has some understanding of the message or "denotative" meaning suggested in the lyrics. Further, listeners are attracted to rap music, in general, for a multitude of reasons. One of the major attractions to rap music is the rhythm and the beat. The beat or rhythm lures the

listener into the music and determines whether he or she will pay attention to the rest of the record. The beat in rap music may explain why some listeners can digest lyrics about race, misogyny, sex and violence.

Rap music encompasses music and lyrics that are sung or spoken. The mic is controlled by the "MC" (for "master of ceremonies") and the "rhymer" (the deliverer of the spoken or sometimes sung rhymes). The "message" in the music is profound for the interpreter or listening audience because it signifies a certain polemic that represents white institutional oppression, economic depression, racism, the First Amendment and the plight of the black male in American culture. The "message" (or its interpretation) in rap music can be equally as powerful as the "deliverer" of that message (e.g. the rapper) because audience members seek authenticity (realness), affirmation and self-identification regarding the content and context of the song lyrics. Just as listening is significant in rap music, so is social self-identification in the performing culture because of its emotional alliances with the performer. Specifically with rap music, self-identity is a merely a component of a larger culture activity that is directly linked to African Americans. Frith (1996) suggests that music socially contributes to self-identity. Music also constructs a sense of identity through direct experiences of "body, time and sociability" (p. 124). Smith (1970) suggests a strong relationship between speech and music (p. 269). Such is the case with the interrelationship between rap music, communication and culture. Aldridge and Carlin (1993) note that understanding the intended message behind the meaning of rap music depends on how the artist "treats" the message. Further, negative reactions to rap music are often "a result of a lack of understanding about the music's purpose" (p. 102). Hence, songs present issues relevant

to the African American community and must be examined in relation to the social conditions surrounding their development. Today, *conscious* rappers are slowly resurging in hip hop culture and are topping *Billboard's* rap charts, as well as reaching mainstream acceptance. However, they represent a diminutive number in the overall scope of the rap genre. Some rappers dedicate one song on their album to social issues, while others produce a complete political album. The rest of this chapter will analyze songs with politically-tinged lyrics from "underground" artists and *conscious* political rappers.

Textual Analysis

Hip Hop's Underground and "Conscious" Political Rap

The term "underground" represents a non-commercialized version of rap music that is a part of hip hop culture. Underground artists are usually promoted through independent labels and don't enjoy the commercial success of mainstream or major label artists. Because of rap music's diverse audience base, there is room within hip hop culture for independent label artists to have a voice. That voice is usually one of rebellion and rage. As presented in the following textual analyses, rebellion, rage, struggle and revolution will be themes that are examined throughout the analysis. The underground political rappers profiled in this study range from one end of the spectrum to the other. Dead Prez and The Roots have similar messages but the difference is that Dead Prez offers a militant Black Panther revolutionary ideology in their music and everyday lives. Following these analyses, the next section examines two of hip hop's most recognized conscious rappers – Mos Def and Talib Kweli – who use their celebrity to empower the black community.

Dead Prez. Dead Prez is an activist duo comprised of emcees M-1 and Stic.man who offer a militant delivery of song lyrics similar to political rappers Public Enemy of the 1980s. John Bush of MTV's All Music Guide reports that the Florida-based political rap duo was inspired by revolutionaries from Malcom X to Public Enemy. Pop Matters writer Dave Heaton's (2000) music review of Dead Prez sums up the group's "struggles" by identifying their enemies as "the gargantuan forces of capitalism, imperialism, and white supremacy, manifested in tangible form by police, schools, politicians, and giant corporations" (Heaton, n.p.). Their debut album, *Let's Get Free*, was released in 2000. They later produced a couple mixtape albums before releasing their "Revolutionary But Gangsta" politically-charged album.

The rappers M-1 (aka Mutulu Olubala) and Stic.man (aka Khnum Olubala) consider themselves workers in the revolutionary process due to their anti-establishment, anti-materialism and anti-imperialism ideologies. In an interview titled "Dead Prez and their thoughts on revolution" posted on the Web site thetalkingdrum.com, a not- for-profit African Web site that promotes liberation, empowerment, unification and justice, M-1, the second half of the rap duo explained the name of their militant rap group. The rapper told Jacuma Kambui (2004, n.p.) that in one sentence the name Dead Prez means "All power to the people!" The duo's revolutionary ideology is further explained by M-1:

> Revolution. Where I'm coming from, the critical part of revolutionary struggle is concerned with taking power out of the hands of people who stole it from us from all these years and returning back those resources. It's going to be a conscious

> worldwide struggle with decisive victory won in the area of defeating capitalism and imperialism which is our main enemy. (Kambui , 2004, n.p.)

Rap music is the vehicle in which communication functions as a tool for political discourse for Dead Prez. The rapper M-1 explains their revolutionary struggle and alignment with rap music as a communication vehicle. He states,

> It [communication] is a very important tool, because that communication can be precise. It can be a weapon and that's how it gets into our music. Dead Prez music is comprehensive of the struggle; of what we learned in and out of the movement. …The most popular way to communicate who we dealing with, that's Rap. Rap is talking to everybody at every part of the earth right now. (cited in Kambui, 2004, n.p.).

Stic.man's ideology of revolutionary struggle connected to music as a communication tool is evident when he states,

> As I got older I understood the severity; the effect that music and words have on one's mind. Now that I'm more conscious, I can express any fact through my music. It's not to make you dance (you can listen to any artist for that)… (cited in Kambui, 2004, n.p.).

The group's militant ideology is present throughout its music, especially when it comes to freedom. Stic.man's view of freedom is centered on marginalized Americans as victims of historical oppression. He states in the interview,

> Politically I beg to differ in the views of freedom. We are victims of a capitalist system. As workers we are exploited. As people we have no power over our own lives. No self-determination and no ability to reproduce the things we need for

> ourselves. So we are dependent in people who historically have beaten us, jailed us, lied to us etc. I don't see any freedom in that. (cited in Kambui, 2004)

In examining songs from Dead Prez's most political album *RGB: Revolutionary But Gangsta*, released by Sony Records, one sees that the duo's revolutionary ideology is manifested throughout the album. The songs "Hell Yeah (Pimp the System)" from their 2004 *RBG: Revolutionary But Gangsta* album and "Police State" from their 2000 *Let's Get Free* album will be examined in this study. These two songs sum up the raw reality faced by minorities in urban conditions. The song "Hell Yeah (Pimp the System)" (Alford and Gavin, 2004, track 5) explores poverty and the extreme actions people take when faced with adversity under these circumstances. Extreme actions include "pimping the system" by taking advantage of the welfare system as a necessity for survival in the "streets":

> We can get some government paper
>
> You know food stamps can we really do that
>
> Hell yea, right there for the taking
>
> Fuck welfare we say reparations
>
> And, uh, you know the grind
>
> Get up early get in the line and just wait
>
> Everybody on break that's part of the game
>
> And when they call your name
>
> Ms. Case Worker let my state my claim
>
> I'm homeless, jobless, times is hard, I'm 'bout hopeless
>
> But I gotta eat regardless

No family to run to I'm 22

Now tell me what the fuck am I supposed to do

My sad story made her feel close to me

I made her feel like it was an emergency

When I came to the crib niggaz couldn't believe

I came back with a big bag of groceries

Dead Prez challenges the "system" and considers "pimping" or criminal behavior a necessary part of the "struggle" because with poverty your choices are limited. The rapper is essentially saying that these limitations are caused by the "establishment" or white institutions' government control and lack of concern for minority citizens.

Then bring on the system

And show that you ready to ride

Till we get our freedom

We got to get over

The concept of "freedom" is an underlying message in conscious rap, particularly with Dead Prez. Their song "Police State" (Alford and Williams, 2000, track 5) from the *Let's Get Free* album uses freedom as a futuristic metaphorical place to journey where race and poverty issues don't exist. Freedom from bureaucratic institutions, government control, oppression, economic strife, prison systems and a police state is expressed throughout all of their music. Specifically, the song "Police State" expresses this ideology.

I want to be free to live, able to have what I need to live

Bring the power back to the street, where the people live

We sick of workin for crumbs and fillin up the prisons

The group further express hostility against the "system" and the plight of the black male in society who faces injustices such as low wages, inequality and racism, which translates into oppression of the black race.

The average Black male
Live a third of his life in a jail cell
Cause the world is controlled by the white male
And the people don't never get justice
And the women don't never get respected
And the problems don't never get solved
And the jobs don't never pay enough
So the rent always be late; can you relate?
We livin in a police state

The rap group metaphorically fuses lyrics and rhetorically uses oppression as the catalyst for seeking a "revolution." I argue that the revolution that Dead Prez is seeking is essentially progress, in any form, for minorities, which is presented so poignantly through their music. Progress is akin to a destination rather than a journey. It represents substantive change in a cultural mindset; change in systematic policies that take both class and race into account and ultimately, equality and equal justice. While political consciousness is at the forefront of Dead Prez's music, their popularity wanes in mainstream arenas, which doesn't stop the militant group from producing songs that resonate with their loyal underground following. The duo understands their message of resistance won't sell to consumers like commodified images and messages in the gangsta rap genre. They also target youth audiences within hip hop culture with their militant

messages. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2006) postulates that the hip hop generation "sees how social issues such as incarceration, poor schooling, no jobs, drugs, and the erosion of family structures arise not just from individual failures but from racially disparate, group-based treatment" (p. 5). Further, Collins (2006) suggests that black youth are a "generation whose actual members remain written off, marginalized, and largely invisible in everyday life" (p. 3).

The next group whose politics will be explored is The Roots. The juxtaposition between Dead Prez and the conscious rap group The Roots (profiled in the next section) is the personal aspect of struggle (jail time, alcoholism, homelessness, crack-addicted family members) and self-critique. The Roots' strength lies not only in their messages but in their instrumentation, which will be discussed in the next section.

The Roots. The Roots, a Philadelphia-based group, have always been political at some level in their music, whether constructing narratives about ghetto conditions or producing albums free of any previously recorded music (considering a lot of rap music "borrows" or samples music of the past). According to John Bush of MTV's All Music Guide (2008), The Roots focus on "live instrumentation at their concerts in the studio…[their] live shows are among the best in the business" (MTV.com). Considered an "underground" act in the music industry, this group has achieved limited mainstream success, yet they received a Grammy Award. Their only album that achieved mainstream status is *Things Fall Apart,* nominated for a 2000 Grammy Award for the Best Rap Album. The album, named after Nigerian author Chinua Achebe's famed novel Things Fall Apart, is considered by critics as "easily their biggest critical and commercial success" (John Bush, 2008). Just as Achebe's 1959 masterpiece showcases the cultural

collision between European colonialism and African customs and how the Nigerian culture could "fall apart" or be compromised if they embrace/adopt colonial customs, the *conscious* rap group uses the album name to metaphorically show how they fuse together the art of hip hop as a lyrical machine incorporating modern jazz and other musical forms to create music that assists in the future development of hip hop rather than it "falling apart." The Roots' audience members generally consist of the college-aged generation and have a loyal following due to their live performance and instrumentation. Nonetheless, The Roots remain political in their message music and through activism by voicing their discontent for the "establishment" and excessive police force along with other topics through music.

A common topic in hip hop and one that this underground group has taken to task through music is police brutality. They took a political stance by releasing their album *Rising Down* on April 29, 2008, representing the 16th anniversary of the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles triggered by the acquittal of four Caucasian officers. There are several themes in their music that emerges that constructs reality for audience members. These themes are reflective of their ideologies of rebellion, materialism and anti-establishment views. On this album, the artists raise concerns of police brutality, the environment, youth and drug use, among other social ills. Specifically, The Roots raise issues of environmental concerns and global warming. The only rap group named to Billboard magazine's The Green Ten (a listing of music's most environmental-friendly musicians), the magazine reports that at the 2008 annual pre-Grammy Awards all-star jam session (dubbed the Green Carpet Bash), The Roots gave away signed compost bins in an effort to promote "going green." Mikael Woods of Billboard (2008) reports that the

group members are also animal lovers who have worked frequently with the activist group PETA on their "Stop the Violence: Go Veg!" campaign (Billboard.com, July 1).

On the song "Rising Down" (Carenard, Jenkins, Mateen, Miller and Trotter, 2008, track 2)the group engages listeners in its analysis of green issues that impact the planet earth. In this song that bears the album's name, the socially conscious rap group raises awareness of environmental issues, a concern that is being promoted heavily in mainstream media:

> Between the greenhouse gases and earth spinnin off its axis
>
> Got mother nature doing backflips
>
> The natural disasters
>
> It's like 80 degrees in Alaska
>
> You in trouble if you not an Onasis
>
> It ain't hard to tell that the conditions is drastic
>
> Just turn on the telly check for the news flashin
>
> How you want it bagged, paper or plastic?
>
> Lost in translation or just lost in traffic?

Here, The Roots clearly express discontent for society's lack of concern of the majority of Americans to participate in efforts to save the planet from pollutants. The denotative or "preferred" meaning of the environmental movement is that globally all humans contribute to making the future of our planet questionable. However, the message of "going green" is often lost in the clutter of advertising messages and media images. The Roots impose the ideology of the wealthy versus the poor when they demonstrate that "You in trouble if you not an Onasis," suggesting that the wealthy don't have to worry

about the plight of the planet and the deterioration of the ozone layer because their wealth puts them in a position to have better options when it comes to the affordability of healthcare, energy resources and the adaptability and/or adoptability of "going green." Those in poverty – the working poor and the unemployed, along with the undereducated – literally can't afford to make "going green" a priority because their limited resources don't allow them the opportunity to make environmental-friendly choices. Nonetheless, this rap group raises the consciousness of how an environmentally-friendly household hinges on financial stability and affordability in our society.

Their song "Criminal" (Carenard, Jenkins, Mateen, Miller and Trotter, 2008, track 7) is a good example of the criminal ideology that is pervasive in popular culture. In this song, the artists metaphorically link the famous Rodney King riots in Los Angeles to society's historical mistreatment of blacks in general. The song also opposes the treatment of black males by law enforcement in this country, rebelling against police brutality:

> Watch us incite riots
>
> Blue cars and light fires
>
> We already been knocked, scrutinized
>
> Plus, cops rush to brutalize us

Police brutality or, as I call it, legally-sanctioned violence, is one theme that has continued to surface throughout the rap music genre and in this dissertation. In 1992 hardcore rapper Ice-T and his rock band "Body Count" made a song that resonated with black men and outraged many white Americans. The song "Cop Killer" would promote violence, in the form of retaliation, against law enforcement. Law enforcement groups

would call for a boycott of the song. Ironically, African American groups such as the Washington-based National Black Police Association and the Los Angeles-based African-American Peace Officers' Association, opposed censorship of the record, citing freedom of speech. Nonetheless, the public outcry led to banning the record. Jon Pareles (1992) of The New York Times reported that "Cop Killer" would be removed from the album of Body Count. Pareles describes the song:

> Cop Killer" is not a pretty song. Its narrator puts on gloves and a ski mask, picks up his 12-gauge shotgun and announces: "I'm 'bout to kill me somethin'/A pig stopped me for nuthin'!" Later, in a call-and-response, Ice-T asks, "What do you wanna be when you grow up?" and the reply comes, "Cop killer!" (Pareles, n.p.)

Hip hop has addressed issues of poverty, race, police brutality, injustice, unfair systems for minorities and many other issues through musical art forms. As a culture, hip hop uses music and the media to communicate its messages. That communication can be generated in the form of CD's, music downloads, blogs, media events, concerts, commercially-sponsored events and so forth. As Marshall McLuhan (2006) postulates, "the medium is the message" (p. 107). McLuhan (2006) explains boldly that the media are more than a conduit to mediate information and just as integral to communication as the message is to the receiver of the information. He states,

> This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology. (p. 107)

One's willingness to express their own ideas or opinions in a pluralistic society allows for agreement and disagreement. Militant rappers (past and present) and contemporary *conscious* rappers are subject to cultural critique by theorists, audience members and others because they publicly express their opinions either through music or through grassroots activism. Noelle-Neumann's (1993) spiral of silence theory links public opinion to the social context of the opinion in the public discourse or environment where the opinion occurs. Simply, people decide whether they want to willingly discuss their opinion based on whether they will or will not receive support of their viewpoint. The message makers or rappers reside in a cultural world where their opinions (cultural messages expressed in music lyrics) and their activist efforts are critiqued by their key audiences, the music industry, journalists, academic theorists and others. In essence, rappers could self-censor, but the perception of that action could diminish the "street cred" or credibility that rappers have in hip hop culture. Depending on the cultural issue or opinion of rapper and how the media report the issue, the rappers could possibly be "silenced" based on their unpopular opinions. For example, the media frenzy created by Ice-T's protest song "Cop Killer" generated public opinion conflicts in media and on the Internet. His unpopular opinion expressed through a song about killing corrupt police officers created a firestorm of controversy among police officers and politicians. After much criticism, the rapper made a decision to pull the record. In an interview at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio with Mike Heck (2008) of The ROC (a grassroots anti-censorship organization), Ice-T said, "I didn't need people to come in and really back me on the First Amendment. I needed people to come in and say 'Ice-T has grounds to make this record" (quoted in Heck, 2008, n.p.). In essence, Ice-T's efforts to refrain from

societal pressures led to his being "silenced" and his opinion on police brutality probably lost ground based on media coverage. His outrage about police brutality was no longer media hype. He gave in to the pressure and said,

> Every time I run into any kind of drama, the press likes to try to make me look bad or humiliate me, like when we pulled the record, all my true friends knew it was a decision we did just to end that whole bullshit issue and move on. I didn't want my band to get pigeon-holed as that's the only reason that record sold. It just got outta hand and I was just tired of hearing it. I said, 'fuck it,' I mean they're saying we did it for money, and we didn't. I'd gave the record away, ya know, let's move on, let's get back to real issues, not a record but the cops that are out there killing people. (cited in Heck, 2008, n.p.)

This reflects Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory and demonstrates how outside pressures and fear of negative sanctions can lead to "silence." When Ice-T pulled the song he was ultimately silenced as a protest artist. His angry voice on police brutality was no longer to be heard, making his political views insignificant.

Hip Hop's Popular Political Rappers and Activism

Two of hip hop's most recognized alternative or political rappers are Mos Def and Talib Kweli. The two artists have collaborated together on an independent label with minimal success, yet both have enjoyed some mainstream success in their solo careers. The commonalities among these selected artists are: 1) their political activism (in music and grassroots work), 2) their Islam (Muslim) religious faith, and 3) they are recognized by audiences and the music industry as anti-establishment artists yet they have mainstream popularity. Further, these artists were selected for this study because each has

achieved mainstream success given their emergence in the early rap "underground" movement of the late 1990s. They have both made appearances in national media outlets, they have served as the voice representative of marginalized citizens and their political views and messages are embraced in the hip hop community. The following section will profile the artists' music and politics and will offer insight into their personal lives that is reflective in their political messages, actions and ideology.

Mos Def

One of conscious rap's most prolific voices is Brooklyn, New York rapper turned actor Dante Terrell Smith (aka Mos Def). According to Peter Relic (2004) of Rolling Stone, Mos Def 's "radiating intelligence and wit...represented the next step in the evolution of the hip-hop MC, sporting all the skills and credibility of the underground plus an undeniable charisma that pushed his music seamlessly into the mainstream" (Relic, 2004, n.p.).

Mos Def and fellow Brooklyn MC and Islam brother Talib Kweli formed the duo Black Star, named after Marcus Garvey's Black Star Line, the first black-owned ship line to go from the U.S. to Africa (Relic, 2004). They would achieve some success as a duo, but their politics around issues of racism and other social justice issues would gain them popularity or "street cred" among their listeners. Mos Def was initially known for making "message" music, but as a social critic and political activist, he has achieved a level of credibility since the year 2000 as an Emmy-Award-Grammy-Award-and Golden Globe-nominated actor.

East Coast rappers Mos Def and Talib's lyrics and activism inform audiences about social justice issues outside boundaries of the "urban landscape" and encompass

religion, the role the black man in society, the criminal justice system and injustices against African Americans as well as humankind in general. Their rise to fame emerged at a critical point in hip hop history due to the violent shooting deaths of charismatic, gangsta rappers Tupac Shakur and Christopher "Biggie Smalls" Wallace in 1996 and 1997 respectively. In the wake of the death of two of hip hop's most successful MC's, their album *Mos Def and Talib Kweli are Black Star* was peppered with lyrics of black leadership and revolution. In the song "RE:DEFinition" (Mos Def and Kweli, T., 2002, track 4)they speak of choosing life or death:

> When 'Pac and Biggie was still cool before they was martyrs
>
> Life or death, if I'm choosin with every breath I'm enhancing
>
> Stop, there comes a time when you can't run

The group's ideology of peace and alliance of musicians is reflective in the following lyric. Given hip-hop's divisiveness as a culture, Mos Def and Talib Kweli are clearly showing how working together as artists instead of competitors in the "street" game that alliances are meaningful and powerful.

> We came to rock it on the tip-top
>
> Best alliance in hip-hop…
>
> Because we rulin hip-hop, yes we is rulin hip-hop

Black Star, as a duo and as a title of an album, would enjoy minimal success. Nonetheless, both artists would evolve to include some mainstream attention. Mos Def's music and political agenda as a solo artist would include his faith. Freelance journalist Ali Asadullah (2008) in the article, "You're Gonna Serve Somebody: Rapper Mos Def

says we all devote our lives to something. He's chosen Allah," explains the rapper/actor's religious commitment to social justice.

> Especially when the topic is social justice, an Islamic understanding has been a hallmark of socially conscious hip-hop. Mos Def, however, represents arguably the first time that an artist, solidly wedded to the orthodoxy of the religion, has stepped into mainstream popularity with a complete, well-articulated Islamic message as part and parcel of that popularity. (cited in Asadullah, 2008, n.p.)

With religion being at the forefront of Mos Def's activist and musical repertoire, his activism is an Islamic mandate and expectation of Allah. He states,

> You're not gonna get through life without being worshipful or devoted to something....You're either devoted to your job, or to your desires. So the best way to spend your life is to try to be devoted to prayer, to Allah. (Asadullah, 2008)

Mos Def's religious ideology is further presented on his 1999 *Black on Both Sides* breakthrough album. The introduction on the album begins with the following words "Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Raheem" meaning "In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful" (Asadallah, 2008). In defense of Muslims on the 2007 HBO series Real Time With Bill Maher, Mos Def articulates religious ideology and terrorist threats to the United States, specifically regarding the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. During his dialogue with the distinguished Dr. Cornel West, Ralph Nader and retired U.S. Army Colonel Larry Wilkerson (former Chief of Staff to U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell), Mos Def illustrates his religious ideology when he states,

> And this is – this is not about the Muslim or the Christian – see, that's the whole thing. The division of Democrat/Republican, Muslim/Christian, Autobot/Decepticon—[laughter]—Crip/Blood, black/white, it's all bullshit. Because the bottom line is that Islam is not the threat, is not a problem. No, it's not! You cannot say a faith who has certain individuals in it who are crazy – and they crazy people everywhere, churches, mosques, airports. (cited in Maher, 2007)

According to a rap and hip hop news Web site, RapWeekly.com, Mos Def called for a National Student Walk-Out day in support of the Jena Six. He asked African Americans and celebrities to support the effort to bring awareness to accusations of racial bias and criminal justice system in Jena, Louisiana in October 2007 (RapWeekly, 2007). The incident that led to the protest was a school fight involving six black teenagers and a white teen; two nooses and a tree became the catalyst for perhaps one of the largest civil rights protest in years, drawing a crowd of more than 10,000 people on September 20, 2007 in Jena. A debate over racial bias in the judicial system led civil rights leaders, activists, musicians and other demonstrators to protest injustice due to excessive charges filed against the six black students (known as the Jena Six) after they were accused of beating a white classmate unconscious and a prosecutor charged them with attempted murder instead of assault. According to journalist Richard G. Jones (2007) of The New York Times, the matter gained the attention of President George W. Bush, who told reporters in Washington that "events in Louisiana have saddened me." He also said, "I understand the emotions....The Justice Department and the FBI are monitoring the

situation down there and all of us in America want there to be fairness when it comes to justice" (cited in Jones, 2007, n.p.).

Mos Def likens the New York police shooting of Sean Bell (who is African American) in New York to the miscarriage of justice in Jena, Louisiana when he proclaims, "Jena Louisiana is the same as 'Jena' New York. From Mychal Bell to Sean Bell our communities [black communities] continue to be targeted" (cited in Rapweekly, 2007, n.p.). Sean Bell is the black man who was shot several times by New York police in 2007. Mychal (pronounced Michael) Bell was the first student of the Jena Six to receive what some perceive to be unfair indictments with an attempted murder charge. In this case, the rapper connects the Mychal Bell incident to the police shooting death of Sean Bell in New York based on the "establishment's" mistreatment of young black men in cities across this country. Both cases contribute to the disproportionate arrests, excessive punishment and in some cases, police "murder" shootings of young black men in America. While there is no official record to show whether the rapper's Jena Six "walk-out" was successful, it does indicate that his commitment to a political cause did not go unnoticed.

Mos Def's ideology of "black murder" is maintained on his solo effort *True Magic*, particularly in the song "Murder of a Teenage Life," (Williams and Smith, 2002, track 11) where he is critical of the murder of black youth in urban America:

The murder of a teenage life

Fire from the cold steel

The heat from the brights

The temperature of flesh and the shortness of breath

The murder of a teenage threat …

My easy speaking is as easy as it seems to be

Hungry belly jamma busts off easily

Balloon bang. POP!

Hot as a bang spot in Bangkok

Colder than a pimp glock

Aim shot, the frame drops

Pressure pushed him to the earth like a rain drop

Take not life in vein

And how the preacher was saying

Remember!

Anyways they laid him in a stray box

Dark suit and gray socks

The neighborhood is all distraught

Candles lit the stoop at the park

Where the family and students are

Confused, in awe

They gape into each others arms

IT'S MURDER!

New absence from a mothers arm

Even the warmth from the mother's arms

Couldn't keep her son from harm

From standing where the gun was drawn

Over come, done and done. He's gone...

MURDER!

Shells fell like a bell that rung

Blood bursts, body temperature fell and plunged

And by the time it took the medics to come

The breath eased out of his lungs

And his soul eased out of the slums

And the voice eased out of the drums

The sirens through their ears, they sung

MURDER! …

I am from the block the PRESIDENT DID NOT CAMPAIGN ON

Where the dollar that the working poor slave for is made on …

Where the blocks are yellow taped off

Mos Def creatively paints a picture of urban America where poverty goes unnoticed, murders go unsolved, children are witnesses to the sights and sounds of death in the streets and where voices are silenced, forever. Themes of black-on-black teenage murder, police killings, crime and drugs are woven throughout the song lyrics on the album and representative of topics that are at the center of media attention on local, regional and national levels.

Hip hop scholar Tricia Rose (1994) advances the idea of these themes by articulating mass mediated metaphors in rap music. She states, "Rap's resistive transcripts are articulated and acted out in both hidden and public domains, making them highly visible, yet difficult to contain and confine" (p. 101). Mos Def not only talks about

topics of murder and poverty, he expands on issues of drug use as a vice for any and everyone. His song "Crime and Medicine" (Smith, 2002, track 5) articulates the perils of selecting drugs as a vice for pleasure that leads to a dead end for the user. He writes,

Strange Times

Everybody got their get high (Oh my)

Their get right, their get nice, they get by (Oh my)

They get open, get ready, get primed

The national pastime is victimless crime

You want your thrill and I want mine

As long we can get it we ain't got to say why

I don't mean to pry, you ain't got to lie

We ain't got to speak when it's written in the eyes

Whenever she was high off the sparkle in her palm

She had a young girl's smile and a hustler's charm

Dying from the city where the hustler's are born

Made, traced, murdered, replaced

Life-long residents barely feel safe

And the street's offer plenty taste and little faith …

In the overall scope of hip hop politics, Mos Def reminds his underground audience that he is a rapper, even though mainstream audiences recognize him more as an actor, which is where the media tend to focus their attention. Through strategic political maneuvering he incorporates his signature sound in hip hop with his mainstream movie success, which results in his ability to bring black issues to a mainstream audience.

Further, his music and his politics are palatable, thereby reaching a broader audience, including politicians, common people, hip hop lovers, pop music fans, and many others who need to hear messages of understanding and self determination.

Dyson (2007) in his book You Know What I Mean? points out that young people need context and understanding of social problems because they represent a different generation. He writes,

> We should always take into account the social condition of the young people who speak and pay close attention to what they say. And we have to understand what political, economic, and social conditions have challenged and shaped their self-understanding. We've got to wrestle with what they deem important—their social and moral priorities. (p. 82)

Tricia Rose (1994) posits that "rap music brings together a tangle of some of the most complex social, cultural, and political issues in contemporary American society" (p. 2). I agree with Dyson and Rose regarding rap music's power to bring attention to a plethora of social justice issues that mainstream media essentially ignores and what Rose (1994) deems the "hidden politics of rap" (p. 106). I believe this is why artists like Mos Def and other political rappers use their music as a voice for the oppressed in an effort to creatively raise awareness about the political constructs of race matters and social equality regarding marginalized citizens on issues that should concern them.

Talib Kweli

Talib Kweli is considered one of hip hop's most important voices. Like many political rappers his message is ripe with anti-establishment rhetoric, but the difference is

that he is also critical of blacks in America. In explaining his metaphorical style and delivery of messages, Kweli (2008) states on his Web site talibkweli.com that,

> The vast majority of my subject matter focuses on black self-love, black self esteem, black self worth…that translates to other communities because if you're a human being, it doesn't matter what color you're talking about. You've been through some sort of struggle and you can apply it to your own life. (cited in Kweli, 2008, n.p.)

In his song "Hostile Gospel" (Greedus, Greene, Marouani, and Smith, 2007, track 3) from his album titled *Ear Drum*, Kweli reflects on a multiplicity of issues that impact all Americans including drug use and abuse, police brutality, issues of race, drug manufacturing by white-owned pharmaceutical companies, and easy access to pharmaceuticals in "the hood" and many other social ills. He further communicates his point of excessive police force in the following lyric:

> It's officially nigga season, these niggaz is bleedin
>
> That's why I'm spittin freedom we had enough of trigger squeezing

Further, this lyric speaks to the excessive force that black males face by the police and to the "establishment's" failure to prosecute the officers for what society views as murder. One case in particular that resonates with this song is the fatal Sean Bell shooting in New York. On November 26, 2006, five New York police officers shot and killed 23-year-old Sean Bell in a hail of 50 bullets just hours before his wedding. Bell was leaving his bachelor party with two friends who were also wounded in the incident. The New York Times writer Robert McFadden (2006) reported that "[a] 12-year police veteran, fired 31 times, and an undercover officer with nine years on the force fired 11 times. The other

officers fired three, four and five times. Shell casings from the officers' 16-shot, 9-millimeter semiautomatic weapons littered the street; at least 40 were later recovered" (McFadden, n.p.). This case brought to the forefront memories of the 1999 death of Amadou Diallo, who according to The New York Times (2008), was an African peddler killed after police fired 41 shots at him. The similarities are that both men were black, unarmed, and in both cases the police "suspected" each had a gun (The New York Times, n.p.).

Grammy Award-winning rapper Chamillionaire has a similar message of police injustice against blacks in his song "Ridin'" (Salinas, Salinas, Jr., Seriki, and Henderson, 2005, track 12) in which he addresses police racial profiling. The following lyrics express the rapper's anti-police ideology when he writes of a police profiling black males by pulling them over in hopes of finding drugs and/or weapons in the late model, expensive vehicle that a young black man probably should not be able to afford:

> They see me rollin
>
> They hatin
>
> Patrolling they tryin to catch me ridin dirty
>
> Tryin to catch me ridin dirty
>
> Police think they can see me lean
>
> I'm tint so it ain't easy to be seen
>
> So they get behind me tryin to check my tags, look at my rearview and they smilin
>
> Thinkin they'll catch me on the wrong well keep tryin
>
> Cause they denyin is racial profiling

Houston, TX you can check my tags

Pull me over try to check my slab

Glove compartment gotta get my cash

Cause the crooked cops try to come up fast

And been a baller that I am I talk to them, giving a damn bout not feeling my attitude

When they realize I ain't even ridin dirty bet you'll be leavin with an even madder mood

This a message to the laws tellin them WE HATE YOU

I can't be touched or tell 'em that they shoulda known

Chamillionaire's lyrics share the same discontent as the small number of *conscious* rappers whose music is largely political. As this study shows, many rappers express a message of powerlessness when it comes to social justice. While some rappers express discontent in one song or two on their respective albums, c*onscious* rappers like Kweli voice strong opinions regarding issues that extend beyond police brutality and racial profiling featured in music lyrics:

Freedom's a road that's seldom traveled, watch hell unravel

Right before the eyes of the soldier who fell in battle

The single mother who raised her daughter to bear the sacred water

And not take the hand of every man who make a offer

To black kids wishin they white kids, when they close they eyelids

Like, "I bet they neighborhood ain't like this"

White kids wishin they black kids, and wanna talk like rappers

It's all backwards it's identity crisis

The industry inside us is vipers with fangs trying to bite us

Drug suppliers is the health care providers

We cakin, makin narcotics outta household products

We ain't workin out 'til we exorcise the demons that's inside us

Plus they seem to just provide us with enough rope to hang ourselves……

On his *Reflection Eternal* album, the song "Africa Dream," (Greene, 2002, track 8) Kweli is nostalgic regarding the price his ancestors paid through slavery and activist efforts for his First Amendment rights to speak freely about social issues and utilize his music to inform, educate and empower America's youth.

Yo, we the reflection of our ancestors

We'd like to thank you for the building blocks you left us

Cause your spirit possessed us

Yo, you blessed us

Thank you very much

Dyson (2007) notes that hip hop can play a vital role in raising awareness and suggests that "at its best, hip hop can challenge young folk to fight for what they believe in" (p. 86). While Mos Def and Talib Kweli are considered the most visibly noticed through their message music and activism, they are perhaps the exception. Many other hip hop artists deserve recognition in the industry and in the hip hop community, yet their voices are not always heard. Whether their voices are clouded among mixed messages in hip hop culture or whether a commodified industry makes their topics less "sexy" and not worthy of air time and marketing dollars, there are artists who have a legitimate message

that may never reach mainstream audiences. One argument could be that the rap industry in general is readily declining in sales. A New York Post article supports that theory. Brian Garrity reported in 2007 that Universal Music Group CEO Doug Morris said the rap genre's sales were off by 44 percent since 2000 and were now accounting for 10 percent of the industry sales (Garrity, 2007, n.p.). Another argument that I think is also plausible is that sex, violence and rebellion by any group sells temporarily. Controversy sells, but on a limited basis. Those limitations come in the form of limited contracts and "silenced" voices when it comes to politics and activism. Perhaps that is why the conscious rap genre is not as popular because, on a broader scale, it could elevate the listener to another level of consciousness. Thus, knowledge equals power and power equals substantive change. Substantive change and empowerment with marginalized citizens and educated mainstream audiences could result in a decline in dollars made.

This study does not specifically lend a voice to those unknown "underground" artists. It does, however, add a new dimension to the cultural critique in that selected artists are presented to show the depth of political voice in music as a path to education, empowerment and political action. It also shows that the same problems that existed when hip hop was born in the late 20th century continue to be addressed more than three decades later.

Conclusion

Socially-conscious/political rap is not the most popular genre in hip hop culture, but it has a purpose greater than its commodified and deeply commercialized counterparts. Perhaps one reason conscious rap is limited in its wide reach to mass audiences is due to the fact that revolutionary messages aren't appealing enough for the

market-driven music industry. Social message music's purpose is to inform, educate and empower America's youth. The education component is deeply rooted in urban conditions where blacks, other minorities and the poor are routinely faced with police brutality, crack cocaine, lack of housing and other economic problems, along with conditions that lead to violence and an unfair justice system. *Conscious* rap songs represent this epidemic metaphorically and literally. The artists profiled in this chapter have each used their voice, their music and their politics to communicate a message of hope, desperation, rebellion and action-oriented politics to make change happen. Social change comes in many forms and the rappers use anti-establishment rhetoric to communicate the power of a unified voice. That unified voice may manifest itself as rebellion, the practice of democracy (voting), freedom of speech and sometimes violence. Several messages are clear in *conscious* rap music and resonate with listeners. Those messages include fairness, equal rights and equal justice for oppressed people, particularly black Americans. However, the listening audience attending concerts don't represent the majority black audience the music is written about. Bakari Kitwana (2005) postulates that there may be a color gap between independent rappers and their audiences, who mainly represent the white population. Kitwana states,

> Armed with messages of Black political resistance, Black pride, and opposition to militarization and corporatization, designed in part to counter the commercial hip-hop party-and-bullshit madness dumbing down the nation's youth, hip-hop's lyrical descendants of the "fight the power" golden era today are booking concerts in record numbers—far beyond anything imaginable by their predecessors. Problem is, they can hardly find a Black face in the audience. (2005, n.p.)

Indeed, the business of the music industry is to sell music, create images and generate a profit. That profit is not based on white record companies instigating revolutionary change nor is the record companies in the business of fostering a climate that welcomes overt political activity by its artists. That is why many political rappers seek independent labels because their freedom of expression is not compromised.

In continuing the *conscious* rap analysis, the next chapter (Chapter Five) will profile hip hop's top two rappers who have enjoyed mainstream success despite their politics of race matters. Kanye West and Lonnie Rashid "Common" Lynn, Jr., will be analyzed using ideological case study analyses in the examination of their politics, their music and their activism in hip hop culture. In addition, their middle-class backgrounds will be analyzed to show the synergy between their music and politics, which contributed to their prominence in the media and in other mainstream arenas. Ironically, Kanye West and Common have musically collaborated with great success. They have both risen to the top of the hip hop genre and command attention and respect from listeners.

CHAPTER V

IDEOLOGICAL CASE STUDY ANALYSES OF *CONSCIOUS* RAPPERS KANYE WEST AND COMMON

"[President] George Bush doesn't care about black people."

-Kanye West (2005)

This chapter examines ideology and continues with a focus on signifying practice and the production of cultural representations, specifically the rise of the *conscious* rapper who has managed to not only top Billboard music charts, but has mainstream and/or crossover appeal to white audiences. While many issues of politics and black culture within a music genre have been raised in previous chapters, this section specifically focuses on profiling two of hip hop's top cultural producers of knowledge, style and black politics. This study has found hip hop as a cultural artifact to be a powerful liaison between the producer of culture (the rapper) and the consumer (the audience/fans). It has also found rap music to be an excellent means of expression for communicating to its audience members/listeners. The *conscious* rappers profiled in this chapter serve as a dominant communicative force that links music, politics and culture together. Hence, hip hop can reach across the African American spectrum to essentially everyone.

Ideology sets the dominant cultural norms and ideas in hip hop culture. In this chapter I analyze the social aspects of ideology, including the role of the *conscious* rapper as the representative of the minority voice of the marginalized. French sociologist Pierre

Bourdieu (1980) suggests that knowledge has tremendous power in our society. In that vein, the *conscious* rappers selected in this study are fellow Chicagoans – Kanye West and Lonnie Rashid "Common" Lynn, Jr. – who use their knowledge, skill, finesse and the mass media to reach key audiences in an effort to educate, empower and attract a broader audience that extends beyond "underground audiences" to mainstream consumers.

Tricia Rose (1994) suggests that rap music "takes place under intense public surveillance, similar contradictions regarding class, gender, and race are highlighted, decontextualized, and manipulated so as to destabilize rap's resistive elements" (p. 104). In the context of consumer culture and freedom of expression, Rose (1994) points out that "rapper's speech acts are also heavily shaped by music industry demands, sanctions, and prerogatives" (p. 104). That is to say that rap music's social critiques from within the industry are influenced by hegemonic forces that control the medium and essentially the social argument or message. Further, I use Kanye West and Common as case studies that provides some clues about celebrity culture as a way to contextualize mass media's representation of the successful black *conscious* rapper in today's society.

Hip Hop and Ideological Hegemony

In hip hop culture, most rappers come from urban settings where poverty and violence are commonplace. In many cases, their rap lyrics express anger about these types of conditions. In that context, music serves as a mechanism to express discontent about personal experiences, society's social ills and resistance to ideological hegemony and the "establishment" or social economic structure in society. With rappers, music is a powerful way to communicate messages of political, economic and social conditions in society. Fiske (1989) proclaims that "ideological forces of domination are at work in all

products of patriarchal consumer capitalism" (p. 105). Hip hop's success is perpetuated by white media institutions who determine what music will be produced, how it is disseminated and what images (mainly negative ones in hip hop) are mediated to consumer audiences. When it comes to hegemonic capitalistic ideologies, it can be inferred that rappers are victims being part of their own victimization. I argue that the hegemonic power structure is only part of the problem. Contributing to the hegemonic dynamic, rappers are compliant in creating music due to economic outcomes. In the end, the creation of and the production and dissemination of negative rap music essentially achieves hegemonic ends. However, there are also other "producers" of resistance music who operate independently as "underground" artists who resist hegemonic rule in the music industry and in society. An example of these underground artists (The Roots and Dead Prez) were examined in Chapter Four of this dissertation. Hip hop, as a capitalistic culture, falls in line with Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, where power is in the hands of the elite or ruling class in society (e.g. the owners of mass media). TIME magazine writer Christopher John Farley (1999) states, "Hip-hop is perhaps the only art form that celebrates capitalism openly....Rap's unabashed materialism distinguishes it sharply from some of the dominant musical genres of the past century" (February 8, 1999). As cited in Mimi's White's (1992) work "Ideological Analysis and Television," Gramsci's concept of hegemony is to "explain the complex ways in which the dominant class maintains its control over society. Hegemony describes the general predominance of particular class, political, and ideological interests within a given society" (p. 167). According to Roger Simon (1991), hegemony "gains the consent of other classes and social forces through creating and maintaining a system of alliances by means of political

and ideological struggle" (p. 24). As historian George Lipsitz (1988) noted, those in power "must make their triumphs appear legitimate and necessary in the eyes of the vanquished" (p. 147). Under this view, White (1992) suggests,

> Social and cultural conflict is expressed as a struggle for hegemony, a struggle over which ideas are recognized as the prevailing, commonsense view for the majority of social participants. Hegemony appears to be spontaneous, even natural, but it is the historical result of the prestige enjoyed by the ruling class by virtue of their position and function in the world of production. (p. 167)

Nathan Abrams (1992) extends his ideas of Gramscian thought to "those rappers who consciously and explicitly claim to speak for their communities" (p. 1). Kanye West and Common are the type of rappers that fall into Gramsci's ideology of "organic intellectuals." These two rappers, although distinctly different in their musical style and delivery, each have characteristics that Abrams (1992) identifies as the legitimate voice that "speak for their communities" in hip hop. Lipsitz (1988) explained Gramsci's ideology of traditional intellectuals as "experts in legitimation" and "organic intellectuals" serve to "give voice to the repressed needs and aspirations of oppressed groups" (p. 146). In a culture of access, "organic intellectuals" (rap musicians) give us instant gratifications such as rebellion and freedom of expression. They also have the platform (mass media) to express what others might be thinking. For example, When Kanye West declared "George Bush doesn't care about black people" on a live NBC televised fundraiser for victims of Hurricane Katrina, he expressed discontent that is presumed to be what many people were thinking regarding the government's slow response to African Americans following the Hurricane Katrina disaster in 2005.

Technological advances in media are why so many people were able to experience firsthand (or hear about) West's remarks so quickly. Our accessibility makes it possible for youth and others to relate instantly through accessibility to information and technological advances such as MySpace, YouTube, Facebook and other Internet resources. Marshall McLuhan (2006) in the 1960s predicted that technological innovations (like advanced media) would impact the education of youth. His theory of Technological Determinism suggests that technology determines who we are and what we do instead of the other way around. A possible explanation is the electronic age radically alters the way we think, act and, possibly, feel, thereby various mediums of popular culture impact the lives of youths. Hence, the dominant voices are more prevalent, but because of rap music minority voices are filtering into mainstream outlets more than ever before. The question becomes, "How often do we hear the minority voice in media?" The implication is that media are powerful in that they help us interpret our existence. Rappers use media as a filter to provide information and insight into the political consciousness of the rap artist by connecting people to cultural differences and social disturbances, as cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1997) describes as "partial synchronization, of engagement across cultural boundaries, of the confluence of more than one cultural tradition, of the negotiations of dominant and subordinate positions," meaning rap's place in history transcends boundaries and culture (p. 28-29).

Rap music is important for a number of reasons as it relates to ideology. First, rappers are able to relate to large and diverse audiences in some way; whether it's a personal struggle or political preference, their relationship to their listener is essential. Second, rap music is important because of capitalism. I believe that without the

entertainment industry we, as a culture, don't (or can't) exist. Third, rap music contributes to the notion of the "celebrity activist." Specifically, *conscious* or political rappers have used media to enhance their "celebrity" and some people (including 'underground' music supporters and mainstream audiences) pay attention to what celebrities do and to what they have to say. Further, in the world of popular music, rap music caters to mainstream audiences. A large white audience equals more (records) units sold, accommodates white "identification" with blackness and gives mainstream audiences a peek inside an arena known as the urban America.

Hip hop's most recognized *conscious* voices, Kanye West and Common, are the poster children for contemporary political activism in mainstream arenas and in hip hop culture. Ideological case study analyses of these two artists and their politics will be examined in the following section of this chapter.

Rappers Kanye West, Common and Celebrity Ideology

Kanye West

Kanye West is arguably one of the most recognized African American hip hop producers and rappers in popular culture. Certainly, there are other well-known rappers in the music industry, but his position as "superstar" or cultural icon is one that is relatively unique in terms of "representation." His fashion sense set him apart from his rap peers who dress in baggy jeans and lots of jewelry. His rise to celebrity was almost instantaneous, first serving as a producer and then launching a commercially successful solo career. According to Birchmeier (2008) of Billboard, West "went from hip-hop beatmaker to worldwide hitmaker, as his stellar production work for Jay-Z earned him a major-label recording contract as a solo artist" (billboard.com, August 12). A man known

for controversy, West amuses crowds with his candor in addressing issues in a public forum, whether from a concert stage or in front of a live televised program. This, of course, makes for good press. For instance, after being named the "Best Male Hip Hop Artist" at the 2008 BET (Black Entertainment Television) Awards, Kanye West declared, "I'm one of the kings in this game right now and my opinion counts" (aired on BET network, June 24, 2008). He went on to say on the television broadcast that, "it definitely feels good, feels like a family reunion here at BET" (Black Entertainment Television, 2008). His reference to the so-called "family" represents his connection to the African American audiences who are the nucleus of his fame and existence. And it represents how BET as a black network with black executives (even though it was sold by its black owner/founder Robert "Bob" Johnson to white-owned media giant Viacom) has embraced him, contributing to the biblical notion of a child straying and returning home. Within black culture, returning home after being "out in the world" is expected. Known for his arrogance and outspokenness, Kanye West, a multiple Grammy Awards winner, has been catapulted to the status of "celebrity." He has graced the covers of American news magazine TIME, entertainment magazine Rolling Stone, men's fashion and culture magazine GQ and numerous other mainstream and entertainment publications (see Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5 in this study). He is more than a rapper. He is a hip hop icon; a superstar. Within black popular media, West's social function as a "successful" young black man in America contributes to Gramsci's concept of organic intellectuals, where a person's social function determined their intellect rather than their ability (Gramsci, 1983).

A celebrity can be defined as an individual that is known for being well-known and occupies space in the public spotlight (Boorstin, 1961; Gamson, 1992). Whether in music, sports, film, television or any medium, celebrities are held in high regard. Further, celebrities influence our thoughts on entertainment, fashion, music and even politics (Campbell, 1988; Thompson 2001).

Kanye West's trajectory as a celebrity or media figure was evident with his commercially successful debut album *College Dropout*, which earned 10 nominations at the 47th annual Grammy Awards in 2004. Jason Birchmeier (2008) in Billboard reported that West's first album won multiple Grammy Awards including: Best Rap Album for *The College Dropout*; Best Rap Song for "Jesus Walks" and a songwriting credit on "You Don't Know My Name" by Alicia Keys and Harold Lily. His sophomore album *Late Registration* won the coveted "Album of the Year" award at the 2005 Grammy Award ceremonies (Birchmeier, 2008, n.p.).

His distinctive image is often noted and his look and style demands attention. His savvy eye for fashion and his ultracasual high fashion attire are frequently talked about in entertainment and fashion magazines. Corporations are taking note of hip hop's influence on fashion and its celebritized culture. TIME reports that Madison Avenue recognized rap's entrepreneurial spirit: "Tommy Hilfiger has positioned his apparel company as the clothier of the hip-hop set, and he now does a billion dollars a year in oversize shirts, loose jeans, and so on" (Farley, 1999). Celebrities influence our thoughts about fashion and the image we want to create. For example, West's designer clothes and bright smile are distinct signs of his trademark image. West is so popular that his image has been commodified and he has made appearances in national commercials for Pepsi and other

companies. According to the Ian Crystal (2008), brand director with Absolut Vodka, West was featured in a 2008 Absolut Vodka ad titled "Be Kanye in an Absolut World." Crystal said of the Kanye West-Absolut partnership,

> Absolut has a long history of working with engaging artists, beginning with Andy Warhol and continuing over the last 27 years. As we usher in a new creative era with our 'In An Absolut World' advertising campaign, we want to work with artists who spark dialogue and inspire people in the 21st century .... This collaboration with Kanye West, whose creative talents extend far beyond his musical career, will use our collective voice to bring style and excitement to our consumers. (Crystal, 2008, concluding para.)

West is an exemplary example of a black man that mainstream America finds palatable, considering the gangsta and/or criminal image is perhaps the most mediated image in popular culture. Rolling Stone writer Lola Ogunnaike (2006) states,

> West is one of the most popular and polarizing artists in music today. And while he's sold more than 4 million albums to date, he is known for his outspokenness as he is for his hitmaking ability...not since Tupac Shakur has a rapper been so compelling, so ridiculously brash, so irresistibly entertaining.

USA Today writer Jenny Eliscu (2007) in her article "Genius is as Genius Does" expounds on West's genius possibility:

> A multi-platinum rapper and producer who is, some say, his generation's most prodigiously gifted hip-hop artist, West has a theory or two about genius and expounds on them with a mixture of enthusiasm and bravado that hints at why critics tend to call him arrogant. West, however, insists that he's just telling things

like they are. And, when it comes to the topic of genius, he sees it like this:

> Anybody can have isolated strokes of genius, but if someone keeps having them, it's fair to say that the person actually is a genius.

West is the exception to the rule when it comes to dark-skinned black men and the stereotypical images portrayed on television, in music videos or film. West serves as a cultural signifier who represents the social significance of "black" success. He is an example of mainstream's social acceptance of the minute amount of "good" that rap music can represent. As a polysemic signifier, West represents many fantasies for black male youth. For instance, his race is a signifier, his creativity is unmatched in the music industry, he is a mentor and role model for young black males, and he's rich (in assets and in creativity). Even with his transgressions (his views on gay relationships, his over-the-top egotistical antics on stage), the media are somehow turned on by his rebellious behavior. Furthermore, he delivers on his promise of creating great music that crosses the boundaries into mainstream arenas. Thus, when West seeks attention, the media play into it. That media attention translates to what Douglas Kellner (2003) refers to as "media spectacle." Kellner (2003) posits that media culture contributes to the fantasy world of celebrity. He states,

> Media culture not only takes up always-expanding amounts of time and energy, but also provides ever more material for fantasy, dreaming, modeling thought and behavior, and identities. (p. 1)

Celebrities embody the spectacle that we (as a society) seem to aspire to become. America's youth are in tune with celebrities and their interests, whether it is their occupation, political viewpoint or, in Kanye West's case, the widely reported death of his

mother in 2007. A celebrity's influence also helps the fan base identify with what's relevant to them personally. For instance, West's outrage against President George W. Bush could be viewed as a single event. Yet when the controversy exploded, the outburst took on the liveliness of an intertextual media event. Whether he planned the "spectacle" or acted spontaneously on live television, it became fare for all media. The Bush criticism by a black man was speculated about across the media: in newspapers and magazines and on televised news programs such as Larry King Live on CNN. Black Entertainment Television (BET) hosted programs to openly discuss race and politics in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the bureaucratic nightmare that led to minorities being treated as what the national news media called "refugees" or second-class citizens in America. Further, West's criticism of this country's most powerful leader received national media attention and created a platform for open dialogue in the mass media on how this country has historically failed and continues to fail its minority citizens. Mass media outlets are the places where the public gains access to celebrities. For West, mass media serve as an open door into every household that has some form of technology – whether it is the Internet, television, radio, iTunes downloads or other technological advances that make media accessible.

There are important implications in the discussion of Kanye West as a cultural icon and celebrity. If you take his philanthropic work, his creative genius in the music industry, his high-fashion style and the work he is doing as an activist, he becomes this multi-faceted person that can relate to many people on many levels. Interest in West is then extended beyond his familiar musical persona and parlance. He becomes more of a "real" person, which authenticates him in the eyes of minority groups and his rhetoric

filters into mainstream media attracting mainstream audiences. This connection is powerful because West is elevated to what anthropologist Christine Yano (1997) calls "commodified identity," which explains how images are cultivated and perpetuated (p. 125). Just as the American flag can serve as the primary symbol of freedom and pride, West's role as a cultural icon is symbolic in that he represents the *black* American dream. He represents the dream that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King spoke about in civil rights speeches. West represents hope and prosperity and serves as a symbol of wealth and enterprise, which is fascinating to both black and white folk in America. Another dimension he adds to his iconic status is that white folks are not only buying his music in record numbers, contributing to his financial success, but his image has been branded in advertising campaigns. He takes advantage of the fact that white kids are buying his music and are enthralled by hip hop. They not only buy his music, they also attend his concerts with a heightened expectation of what The Seattle Times writer Patrick MacDonald calls a "good performance" (April 11, 2008). MacDonald said of West's August 2008 concert at KeyArena in Seattle that "it's the biggest rap show to ever play Seattle." He expounds on West's media hype and his braggadocios behavior:

> It's comical sometimes, the way West needs to brag that he's the greatest. He's so sensitive about it that he gets easily offended when reminded that maybe he's not as talented as he thinks. The way he keeps harping on himself, you figure he must have to constantly stroke his own ego just to stay in the game…But in reality he doesn't have to say a thing. The boasts are unnecessary. All he has to do is get on stage and *show* us how great he is. A good performance is worth a thousand boasts. (MacDonald, 2008, n.p.)

Over the past few years, West has used his celebrity to garner favorable publicity by making the cover of mainstream news publications such as TIME, high-end male fashion magazines such as GQ and entertainment publications such as Rolling Stone. No stranger to controversy, West's portrayal as Jesus Christ on the February 9, 2006 cover of Rolling Stone stirred emotions from religious groups and drew criticism from major news outlets and others. As depicted on the following magazine cover (Figure 2), the image of West with a crown of thorns on his head.

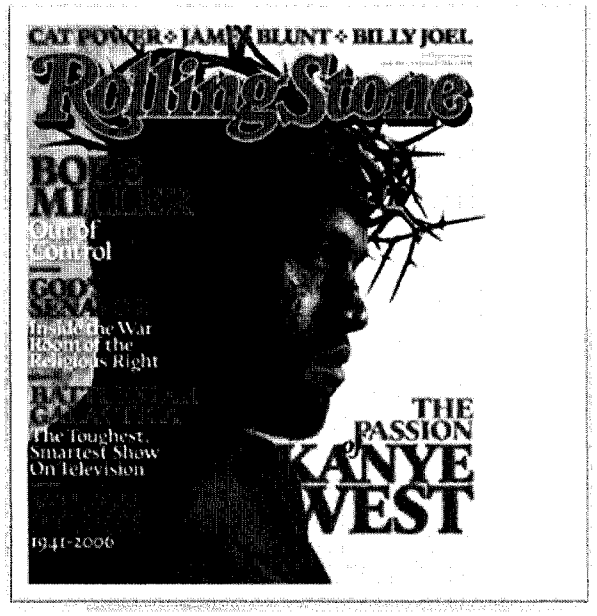

Figure 2. Kanye West on the cover of the February 2006 issue of popular magazine. From Rolling Stone, February 9, 2006, by David LaChapelle, (n.p.).

"The Passion of Kanye West" cover is a paradoxical reference to the box office smash "The Passion of The Christ," a Mel Gibson film about the last 12 hours of Jesus of Nazareth's life. At the time West graced the covers of this entertainment publication, he was a 27-year old rapper/producer who was nominated for eight Grammy awards, including album of the year for his sophomore album *Late Registration* (MSNBC,

January 24, 2006). Offering an African-American perspective, cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal (2006) notes that rappers are not known for garnering national publicity for something they said. He determined that Kanye West's magnificent power in the media is generally unheard of:

> West… has made his impact on the level of discourse -- when was the last time a "rapper" drew attention to herself because of what he or she said? Despite the fact that many believe that hip-hop's importance resides in its rhetorical power, there are relatively few examples of hip-hop artists drawing mainstream attention for the content of their rhetoric -- not as popular musicians -- but as citizens providing social commentary. (Neal, 2006, n.p.)

Offended white Christian organizations such as the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights criticized West and Rolling Stone. The Catholic League's president, William Donahue, took issue with both West and the magazine, calling the publication "racist" for not publishing a similar submitted photograph of radio shock jock Howard Stern years ago. On the organization's Web site, his critical comments were perhaps indicative of what many Christian white readers felt:

> If it is true that West is a morally confused black young man, it is also true that Rolling Stone is staffed by morally challenged white veterans: they are to West what white boxing agents in the 20th century were to black boxers—rip-off artists. It is not for nothing that West poses as a Christ-like figure on a magazine geared to whites. To top it off, the white readership is bound to get a kick out of knowing that the 'The Passion of Kanye West' is the rapper's self-confessed passion for pornography. (Donahue, 2008, n.p.)

Adding fuel to the flame, Christian writers Jason Barnes and Jim Meyers (2006) in their article "Christians Angered by Kanye West Mockery" posted on the religious Web site also expressed outrage over West's photograph, stating that offended Christian groups have called the cover image "sacrilegious" and "an insult to Christians" (January 26, 2006). Charnaine Yoest, vice president of the Family Research Council concurred with the Christian criticism of West stating:

> I think Kanye West is a distraction from the real story.... The real story is Rolling Stone mocking millions of Christians in this country and worldwide who believe in Jesus Christ...This is an issue of corporate responsibility. (cited in Barnes and Meyers, 2006)

The reaction to West's controversial cover is an example of the white-privilege religious ideology in this country and the juxtaposition of a young black man portraying the "son of God." How dare a rapper portray such a sacred image in a hegemonic and patriarchal culture where the worldview of Jesus is associated with purity and the "white" race? For West, I argue that he used the controversial magazine cover and article to shock people into learning more about his religious and personal politics by presenting an image of "I'm equal to Jesus Christ," which resulted in mainstream publications, religious organizations and others expressing criticism across media outlets, contributing to the discourse surrounding rap music. The very idea of his self-critique coupled with his large ego elevates him to a level where he, for a moment, had the world stage to prove the power of his celebrity. That world stage is the paradoxical fine line where West makes his connection to Jesus Christ – through words and actions which are compelling and cause for intellectual examination. It is not important whether West thinks of himself as

Christ. I believe what is important to him is the spectacle he creates when he pushes the envelope to gain media attention, which results in dialogue associated with social attitudes about controversy. I argue that West is what Gramsci (1983) refers to as an "organic intellectual" to one group, a creative musical genius to another, a superstar or cultural icon to a large segment of the population. West's appearance as Christ on a popular magazine cover contributes to the theory of media spectacle because of his socially disapproved behavior or mockery, which insulted many Christians. Interestingly, West diverted attention from the type of publicity generally associated with hip hop – a misogynistic, materialistic, women-bashing culture of disrespect. West does more than create good music. He has the power to make mainstream audiences and media institutions listen to what he has to say, even if the content and context is controversial. He cannot be discounted in popular culture because his relationship with his audience members and mass media together ultimately contribute to his popularity. Even TIME, one of America's top news magazines, recognizes West's star power and genius characteristics. He has achieved what no other black male hip hop artist has accomplished thus far in the history of TIME magazine – making the cover of the August 29, 2005 issue. Only one other hip hop artist has experienced this milestone; singer-actress, Lauryn Hill, was the first hip hop artist (male or female) to make the historic hip hop cover on February 8, 1999 (TIME, 2005 and 1999).

West's heightened celebrity led to more front cover exposure and in-depth coverage with mainstream entertainment publications like Entertainment Weekly and African-American targeted publications such as Vibe, Source and others.

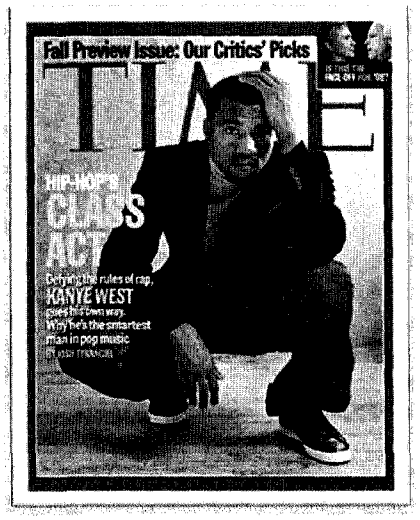

Figure 3. Kanye West is the first male rapper to appear on TIME's cover.

From www.Time.com, (n.p.).

Figure 4. TIME's first hip hop cover. Female hip hop star Lauryn Hill.

From www.Time.com, (n.p.).

Figure 5. Kanye West on the cover of GQ, men's fashion magazine.
From www.GQ.com web site, (n.p.).

In addition, many of West's song lyrics address his stance on political issues and his views on media ownership and hegemonic challenges. Jason Birchmeier (2008) with Billboard confirms West's crossover appeal to mainstream audiences and his iconic status. He states,

> It's worth noting how West shattered certain stereotypes about rappers. Whether it was his appearance or his rhetoric, or even just his music, this young man became a superstar on his own terms, and his singularity no doubt is part of his appeal to a great many people, especially those who don't generally consider themselves rap listeners. (Billboard, 2008, n.p.)

West reached No. 1 on the Billboard charts with his inaugural album *The College Dropout* in 2004 on Roc-A-Fella Records. This album the Grammy Awards for Best Rap Album and the song "Jesus Walks" won for the Best Rap Song. His sophomore album in

2005 titled *Late Registration* won Album of the Year. His third album, *Graduation*, was released in 2007 with hits such as "Touch the Sky" (Birchmeier, 2008).

Throughout the narrative in West's songs, he articulates the plight of blacks and his songs represent various contradictions in black life. West expresses his anti-establishment ideology in the song "Jesus Walks" (Ari, Lundy, and West, 2004, track 7) by addressing through music various global issues of war, black-on-black crime and hegemonic resistance from record executives for creating a song that was believed to receive little airplay.

Yo, we at war

We at war with terrorism, racism, and most of all we at war with ourselves

(Jesus Walks)

God show me the way because the Devil is trying to break me down

(Jesus Walks with me) with me, with me, with me

West's religious ideology and criticism from record executives is expressed in the verse "God show me the way because the Devil is trying to break me down." Here, the artist is relying on a higher power to not only guide him, but to also make the way possible through the challenges he faces from oppressive, white-owned media institutions and possibly anyone who doesn't share his ideological values or spirit of self-determination.

They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus

That means guns, sex, lies, video tapes

But if I talk about God my record won't get played, huh?

West's defiance to make the "Jesus Walks" song and prove the record labels wrong is demonstrated in this song. He reminds those that didn't share his ideological views that

his success would come sooner rather than later. He faces the possibility that his song may not get air play, which would in turn affect his "ends," which is slang for dividends.

Well let this take away from my spins

Which will probably take away from my ends

Then I hope this take away from my sins

And bring the day that I'm dreaming about

Next time I'm in the club everybody screaming out

A good example of West's discontent with the police is expressed in this lyric:

It's kinda hard hard

Getting choked by the detectives yeah yeah now check the method

They be asking us questions, harass us and arrest us

Saying "we eat pieces of shit like you for breakfast"

In the song "All Falls Down" (Hill and West, 2004, track 4) on the 2004 *College Dropout* album, West reveals a multiplicity of issues regarding self-reliance, black women and materialism, peer pressure among teens and pursuit of the American dream.

Man I promise, she's so self conscious

She has no idea what she's doing in college

That major that she majored in won't make no money

But she won't drop out, her parents will look at her funny....

....And she be dealing with some issues that you can't believe

Single black female addicted to retail and well

West articulates the juxtaposition between poverty and the attraction of excessive materialism. He suggests that his desires for wealth and fame are no different than

anyone else's and that values can shift due to the financial rewards that come with fame. His imperfections or self-critique of buying jewelry from Jacob the Jeweler, a well known jewelry designer to the hip hop stars, instead of making a long-term investment in a home is evident in this lyric:

> But I ain't even gonna act holier than thou
>
> Cause fuck it, I went to Jacob with 25 thou
>
> Before I had a house and I'd do it again

West's ideology of fulfilling the American dream is further evident in his 2005 album, *Late Registration.* The song "Touch the Sky" (Fiasco, Mayfield, Smith and West, 2005, track 3) articulates his path to success from hip hop dreamer to a hip hop icon.

> For the day I die, Imma touch the sky
>
> ….Me and my momma hopped in the U-Haul van.
>
> Any pessimists I ain't talked to them,
>
> Plus, I ain't have no phone in my apartment.
>
> Let's take 'em back to the club.
>
> Least about an hour I would stand on line,
>
> I just wanted to dance.
>
> I went to Jacob an hour after I got my advance.
>
> I just wanted to shine.
>
> Jay's favorite line: "Dog, in due time"
>
> Now he look at me, like "Damn, dog, you where I am"
>
> A hip hop legend.
>
> I think I died in an accident, cause this must be heaven

West demonstrates that hip hop offers more than a forum for addressing political viewpoints. It offers many rewards in a culture of access and excess, one of the many contradictions this study found evident of hip hop culture.

Finally, the song "Flashing Lights" (Hudson & West, 2007, track 9) from the 2007 album, *Graduation,* imposes West's anti-establishment ideology "Feeling like Katrina with no FEMA," expressing his discontent for the government's very slow response to victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Considering his political stance on how the federal government mishandled the Katrina disaster, West's critique is representative of the despair felt by many marginalized citizens.

West's success in music and his politics are interrelated. While West maximizes his fame by appearing in mass media in multiple forms (rapper, philanthropist, activist), he certainly fits the definition of what Boorstin refers to as "celebrity" who is "known for well-known" (Boorstin, 1961, p. 57) regardless of "whether that eminence derives from the entertainment field, medicine, science, politics, religion, sports, or close association with other celebrities" (McCutcheon, Lange & Houran, 2002, p. 67).

Lonnie Rashid "Common" Lynn, Jr.

Kanye West's protégé, Common (formerly Common Sense) can be lauded as one of hip hop's most recognized *conscious* rappers. Like his highly-celebrated counterpart Kanye West, Common is at the top of his game in the music business and in Hollywood. He is a respected rapper, actor and activist. This section explores the thirty-something year-old lyricist and cultural icon who uses rap to promote positivism and expresses his understanding of the genre because he is almost the same age as hip hop.

Born Lonnie Rashid "Common" Lynn, Jr., he is one of hip hop's success stories from the South Side of Chicago. He doesn't come from the streets like many rap artists. His mom was an educator and his father a former ABA basketball player and youth counselor. He debuted in 1992 with minimal success as a rapper. After moving to another record label, Common released another album and established his reputation as "one of the underground's best (and wordiest) lyricists" (Huey, 2008). According to Alex Frutcher (2005) of SoundSlam.com, a music entertainment Web site, Common has been regarded as "one of the most skillful Hip Hop artists" (n.p.).

Journalist Chris Riemenschneider (2005) of the Minneapolis Star Tribune reports that Common's album *Be* is easily the "most critically lauded hip-hop album of the year so far. It was also heavily produced by Kanye West. It's also the most successful of Common's 13-year career, having debuted at No. 1 on Billboard's hip-hop and R&B charts the week of release (n.p.). Riemenschneider (2005) reported that Common's commercial breakout can be credited to Kanye West, rap's "hottest tastemaker who produced nine of the 11 tracks." In the interview, Common noted,

> I knew Kanye before he was Superman…He was always a talented and hungry kind of dude, and a revisionist. He's opened a lot of things up in hip-hop right now. (Riemenschneider, 2005, n.p.)

His stage name is anything but common. Journalist Nate Peterson (2007) of the Aspen Times in Colorado explains:

> The stage name is misleading, to say the least. Common – formerly Common Sense – writes rhymes that are provocative, introspective, soulful, anything but ordinary when compared to most commercial hip-hop records of late (2007, n.p.).

A man who espouses virtues of love and positivity in his music over materialism and greed, which the industry makes easily accessible, Common represents a new generation of rappers on the *conscious* level, even though he is one of the older rappers in the genre. While raising issues that plague minorities, the talented lyricist offers his listeners a more positive perspective on life in general. Much of his credibility is based on his skill as a talented lyricist and a political activist, and his success is predicated on a dream of being successful without "selling out" in the music business, meaning without losing your soul to a commercialized music industry. The term "sell out" is a huge contradiction for the rapper considering his powerful self-love rhetoric juxtaposed to his marketing the 2008 Lincoln Navigator brand, a luxury sports utility vehicle valued at over $45,000. Ironically, Ford Motor Company, which makes the SUV, announced that it would donate some proceeds to the rapper's "Common Sense Foundation" and sponsor events on the organization's behalf. According to Jean Halliday (2007) with Advertising Age, the rapper-actor-entrepreneur will be involved in other promotional programs with Ford Motor Company:

> Common will appear next spring at test-drive events, dubbed Lincoln Lounge, and will be integrated online at LincolnLounge.com. Lincoln is wrapping up details on online and offline promotions, licensing of his songs for TV and web ads and how the automaker will integrate into his 2008 concert tour (n.p.).

In addition, The Grammy Award-winning rapper has made the transition from rapper to actor to entrepreneur. Common has film credits in his entertainment toolbox. He has made appearances in Brown Sugar in 2002, Dave Chappelle's Block Party in 2006,

Smoking Aces in 2007 and box office hit American Gangster with Oscar-winning actor Denzel Washington in 2007.

Figure 6. Common sporting his trademark weed hat.

From EntertainmentWeekly.com web site, (n.p.).

Figure 7. Common poses next to the luxury Lincoln Navigator SUV.

Photo posted on Autoweek.com web site, (n.p.).

Common is also featured in the "Yes We Can" promotional political video in support of African American presidential candidate and Illinois Senator Barack Obama. Like Obama, Common is a member of the mega-church Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago that boasts 8,000 members and whose pastor made headline news when controversial sound bites from his church sermons were aired. The church has been under a microscope for its religious ideology and for the pastor's politics. Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Senator Obama's long time pastor in Chicago, is considered as Obama's "spiritual mentor." Ben Calhoun (2007) with Chicago Public Radio reports that Obama has been "one of several Democrats saying religious issues should not be claimed just by Republicans and the political right" (n.p.). Reporters Brian Ross and Rehab El-Buri (2008) of ABC News reported that Obama's pastor said "blacks should not sing 'God Bless America' but 'God damn America'" (March 13,2008). ABC News quotes Rev. Wright from his 2003 sermons (that are offered for sale by the church):

> The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing "God Bless America." No, no, no, God damn America, that's in the Bible for killing innocent people. God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme. (Ross and El-Buri, 2008, n.p.)

The media coverage lasted for weeks surrounding the controversial comments made by the presidential candidate's pastor. Further, some spoke out against the media's handling of the comments. Rapper Common criticized the media for their obsessive media coverage of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright and offered explanation for the pastor's

message. Entertainment Weekly writer Simon Vozick-Levison (2008) reported that Common said in an interview that,

> Obviously, the media has an agenda. I don't follow what the media says. I'm a thinker for myself. And I just encourage people to be objective: When you're watching, use your inner eye and really try to watch the person and see what you think about them. Because you can never really capture a person in the media blitz. (Vozick-Levison, 2008, n.p.)

He explained that "understanding" is crucial in making progress. Common stated,

> I may not agree with people that I love, but if we *understand*, that what's important. I've been going to that church since I was eight years old. So what he's doing is giving people an understanding of a man's perspective that grew up in the era of racial prejudice and has since progressed. (Vozick-Levison, 2008, n.p.)

I argue that Common's criticism of the media hype regarding Rev. Wright and the rapper's views on healing and "understanding" is self-serving in many ways. His celebrity and sustainability as an artist can be largely attributed to media exposure in some way. As long as the media attention a celebrity receives is positive, the media can be viewed as responsible or adhering to socially acceptable behavior but, when the media intensely covers a topic, in this case Rev. Wright's comments, they receive criticism for supposedly having a political agenda.

There is pressure that comes with being a *conscious* rapper, particularly since the music industry is a giant promoter of the negative aspects of rap and hip hop culture. Common's reaction to the pressure of being categorized or called a *conscious* rapper is explained during an interview with Corey Bloom (2005) of Synthesis.net. He said,

> I've always thought that life and hip-hop need to have balance. Everybody doesn't need to act like they're conscious. Honestly just because you hustle doesn't mean you're not intelligent; you should be able to use all those aspects of who you are, and then express that in the music. (cited in Bloom, 2005, n.p.)

Common said his purpose as a rapper is multi-faceted, which is "to enlighten. To entertain. To remind people that we are people: we can love, and hustle, be sexual, and spiritual all in one" (cited in Bloom, 2005, n.p.).

His music poignantly expresses his concerns, contradictions and self-reliant ideology in hip hop culture. One of Common's most popular albums, *Be,* was produced by Kanye West on his G.O.O.D (Getting Out Our Dreams) label and released in 2005. His song "Faithful" (West and Lynn, 2005, track 4) challenges black men to think of how they would treat women if God was a woman. In a cultural context, the connotative meaning is the interpretation that a black woman as God would offer an alternative perspective on life and love instead of the patriarchal, mainstream Christian viewpoint.

> I was rollin' around in my mind it occurred
> What if God was a Her?
> Would I treat her the same? Would I still be runnin' game on Her?
> In what type ways would I want Her?
> Would I want her for her mind or her heavenly body?
> Couldn't be getting' bogus with someone so godly
> If I was wit her would I still be wantin' my ex?
> The lies, the greed, the weed, the sex?
> Wouldn't be ashamed to give Her part of my check

Wearin' her cross, I mean the heart on my neck

On the *Like Water for Chocolate* album released in 2000, Common's political song "A Song for Assata" is representative of the nationalist view of black liberation struggles regarding Black Panther Party member Assata Shakur. Shakur, according to the Social Justice Movements web site (2008), was "found guilty of the murder of both the state trooper and Zayd Shakur, for her involvement at the gun battle. In 1979 she escaped prison and lived underground until 1986, when she was granted political asylum in Cuba, where she resides today" (Social Justice Movements, 2008, para. 3). The lyrics in "A Song for Assata" (Poyser, Burton, and Lynn, 2000, track 15) include,

In the Spirit of God.

In the Spirit of the Ancestors.

In the Spirit of the Black Panthers.

In the Spirit of Assata Shakur.

We make this movement towards freedom

for all those who have been oppressed, and all those in the struggle ....

.... They fabricated cases, hoping one would stick

And said she robbed places that didn't exist

In the midst of threats on her life and being caged with Aryan whites

Through dark halls of hate she carried the light

I wonder what would happen if that woulda been me?

All of this shit so we could be free.

Yeah, I often wonder what would happen if that woulda been me?

In this verse Common suggests, based on his lyrics, familiarity with the hegemonic restraints found in the music business by expressing his views on how oppressive systems can control artists and how blacks are enslaved by having their own fears.

> Freedom! You askin me about freedom. Askin me about freedom?
>
> I'll be honest with you. I know a whole more about what freedom isn't
>
> than about what it is, cause I've never been free.
>
> I can only share my vision with you of the future, about what freedom is.
>
> Uhh, the way I see it, freedom is-- is the right to grow, is the right to
>
> blossom.
>
> Freedom is - is the right to be yourself, to be who you are,
>
> to be who you wanna be, to do what you wanna do

Regarding pressures from the music industry to create a certain type of music, Common says he has artistic freedom to produce what he wants. This is a rarity in the music industry considering its hegemonic control over the cultural production of misogynistic and materialistic art form in hip hop culture. Common boldly states that,

> I always deliver what I am, whether they're [industry executives] with my ideas or not. I just give it to them… They know that I'm gonna do what I do; I'm an artist like that. They allow me that space, and hope that I'm gonna deliver that stuff that the masses can be in tune with. Sometimes it will, sometimes it won't. You just have to create from the heart. (cited in Bloom, 2005, n.p.)

Common's politics in music can be reflective of the current attitudes in black culture. The song "The People," (Common, 2007, track 3) from his 2007 *Finding Forever* album,

represents the cultural and political differences in mainstream America and black America in contemporary times.

Why white folk focus on dogs and yoga

People on the low end try to ball and get ova

Lyrics are like liquor for the fallen soldier

From the bounce to the ounce, it's all our culture

Everyday we hustlin

Tryin to get them customers

Law, we ain't trustin them

Thick bras, we lustin them

Sick and tired of punchin it

I look on the busted them

When I see them strugglin

I think I'm touchin them

Common's ideology of self-empowerment, self-reliance, knowledge and the need to connect to "the [black] people" are demonstrated in this song lyric.

Can't leave rap alone, the streets need me

Hunger in they eyes, is what seemed to feed me

Inside peace mixed with beef, seemed to breed me

Nobody believe, until I believe me

Now I'm on the wise

Doing business with my guys

Visions realized

Music affectin lives

A gift from the skies

To be recognized

I keep my eyes on the people, that's the prize

In addition, Common understands that his music resonates with young people, mainly blacks. His political ideology is demonstrated in the song lyric that mentions presidential hopeful Barack Obama. He believes he connects with people using his rhymes just as Obama does when he speaks on the world stage.

My drama

Standin in front of the judge with no honor

My rhymes take mike to people like Obama

The karma of the street

Says needs and takes

Sometimes we find peace

In beats and breaks

Dyson (2007) poignantly describes the role of the socially *conscious* rapper. He states,

> At their best, socially conscious rappers tackle thorny social problem and perhaps inspire those who engage in action. Such a role for the artist should not be down-played, underestimated, or even undervalued. (p. 70)

My analysis of the role of the *conscious* rapper in the political sphere of hip hop culture advances the idea that it is possible to construct new identities in a culture filled with mass mediated images of materialism, violence and disrespect for women. The underling importance of having a legitimate voice in hip hop contributes to a black youth

culture with its own values, attitudes and concerns. The dominant culture's view of black youth culture is not representative of the *conscious* ideology. For instance, black feminist bell hooks (1994) postulates that the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" or white-dominated mass media promote negative images in rap music in order to maintain "patriarchal social order" where "patriarchy and sexism continue to be the political and cultural norm in our society" (p. 116). In essence, the cultural context of *conscious* rap music is found in the larger context of a controversial genre that promotes violence, misogyny and materialism on one hand and social responsibility on the other. Even though *conscious* rap is not new to hip hop, it has yet to gain the notoriety of the highly-mediated gangsta genre.

Conclusion

As a culture, we try to make sense of the world around us. We try to understand popular culture without considerations of global exploitation and capitalist injustices. Our ever-increasing demand for more celebrity, more mediated reality, more status and more information contributes to the continued growth of a culture of access and a culture of excess. Within that culture of access and excess is celebrity worship and heroism. Boorstin (1961) explained celebrities are different from heroes. He posits that the "hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero was a big man, the celebrity a big name" (p. 61). In this study the *conscious* rappers identified serve as media celebrities in hip hop culture and are interjected into mainstream arenas. In media-saturated countries such as the United States, celebrities can have an enormous impact on social behavior on followers. Important to celebrity influence is a theoretical construct known as "identification." As indicated by Fraser and Brown (2002) in their study titled

"Media, Celebrities and Social Influence: Identification with Elvis Presley," identification is a "fundamental process of social change" (p. 187). According to Burke (1969) identification occurs when two individuals have the same interests (p. 180). I argue that Kanye West and Common contribute to Burke's theory of identification because of their reciprocal relationships with their audience/followers and their shared interests of black pride and positivism in music. As celebrities, these men have power because their audience gives it to them. When Common advocates for PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) his work is a reflection of the values mentioned in his song lyrics. When West's mother, Dr. Donda West, passed away in 2007, his audience could relate to losing a parent or loved one. When West called President George Bush a racist on national television, his black audience applauded his reaction to the bureaucratic failure regarding mainly black Hurricane Katrina victims in New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast. His record sales never declined, nor did he lose his audience base. The same cannot be said for the Dixie Chicks who in 2003 criticized President George W. Bush and found themselves ostracized overnight by their fans and the country music industry alike. The New York Times writer Jon Pareles wrote that the criticism of the president "led to a partisan firestorm, a radio boycott, death threats" and the "country's gatekeepers disowned them over politics" (May 21, 2006). West never apologized for his remarks criticizing the president. According to Pareles (2006) of The New York Times, the Dixie Chicks, however, issued a statement of apology for being "disrespectful" to his office, but as one added, "I just want to see every possible alternative exhausted before children and American soldiers' lives are lost" (May 21, 2006). I believe the difference in the audience response to the two separate incidents is

indicative of what Rokeach (1973) defined as personal values, which are "an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence" (p. 5). West's primary audience of black folk could relate to his discontent with a bureaucratic society. The Dixie Chicks, on the other hand, betrayed the commonly held belief of patriotism, a value or ideology held in high regard among Caucasians in the United States.

Hence, the *conscious* rapper, a modern day Griot, promotes values of responsibility, values of accountability, racial ideology and an ideology of resistance to dominant value systems (cultural and political) through music lyrics, social responsibility and identification with audience members. However, even though these multi-talented rappers discussed in this chapter have helped bring attention to African Americans on a national level, there is more work to be done in terms of social justice. In an interview with Bloom (2005), Common explained the black conscious theme in hip hop culture when he said,

> When I give the message of black pride and black love, it's important because that's who I am. That's me and my family, and my community. But it's also a message of self-love, whether you're white, Asian or Latino. It's not taking away from you all, it's like we as black people need to love ourselves because we came from the underground trying to get to an equality level. It's important that I reinforce that because we have so many obstacles just being black in America. I speak on it from that level, but I hope it is a universally encouraging theme. (cited in Bloom, 2005, n.p.)

Rap music in general maintains its negative stereotype and is still representative of a materialistic and misogynistic culture. Despite the provocative work of the socially-conscious rapper, the world stage is where massive change must occur. Since hip hop is so commercialized and commodified, Common and Kanye blur the line between commodification and their self-righteous rhetoric with the branding of their images. This chapter profiled two of hip hop's most prolific *conscious* rappers whose music signifies the depth of societal ills. Further, rap music is a testament to impact youth audiences to make a positive difference in their own lives and their communities. The collective denotative message of these underground artists is empowerment and enlightenment, both necessary to make change happen at any level.

CHAPTER VI:

CONCLUSION

> "All marginal groups in this society who suffer grave injustices, who are victimized by institutionalized systems of domination (race, class, gender, etc.) are faced with the peculiar dilemma of developing strategies that draw attention to one's plight"
>
> - bell hooks (1995, p.58)

The above quote taken from black feminist scholar bell hooks' (1995) book Killing Rage exemplifies life circumstances of the oppressed. This project emerged at a time when the political landscape in America is taking a radical turn. The United States has its first-ever African American Democratic Party presidential nominee, Barack Obama. At the same time, racist and sexist language in hip hop culture has been put under a microscope and re-examined music and society as a whole.

In an effort to analyze hip hop culture and rap songs that are laced with protest messages by African American artists in the early 21st century, critical analysis was used as a means of examining cultural artifacts (songs as text) and activist efforts within hip hop culture to explore hip hop as a social movement. The study was guided by the use of cultural studies, critical social theory, Black feminism, and media studies to examine the ideologies of blackness, race and gender that are mediated via the music industry. It drew upon a wide range of scholarship for support (Gray, 2005, 1995, 1986; hooks, 1994, 1981; Dyson, 2007, 2006, 2001, 1996; George, 1996; Rose, 1994; Hall, 1996; Carey, 1989; Kellner, 2003, and others). Textual analyses, social movement theory, and

ideological case study analyses were used to contextualize how hip hop culture and its subgenre, rap music, assist in the development of political consciousness among young people in the post-civil rights era. The use of these theories and methodologies together allowed for a more in-depth critical analysis of the complex diversities within hip hop culture.

Rap music is used in many ways in hip hop culture to articulate violence, racism and oppression and has occupied space in mainstream media as a "dog-eat-dog world where you do what you got do to make it even if it means fucking over folks and taking them out" (hooks, 1994, p. 117). In many cases, popular rappers are great entertainers even though some serve as the legitimate voice of marginalized citizens. One sub-genre of hip hop known as *conscious* rap, has helped move the perception of the materialistic, sexist rap culture to a place beyond the negative space it has occupied in mainstream media for so long. While *conscious* rap speaks to positivism and hip hop's politicization, the rap music in general is limited by capitalistic, hegemonic constraints. Lusane (1994) illustrates the impact of capitalism in contemporary America:

> From production to consumption, black cultural expressions, and, more importantly, those who produce them, are vulnerable to control, manipulation, and exploitation. (p. 42)

On one hand, *conscious* rappers (and other categories of rap) find themselves in a place to legitimize hip hop as a political force, but on the other hand they are part of an exploitative white-owned media industry where they are simultaneously serving as victims and perpetrators of the cultural production of images and identity.

This research utilized a number of strategies to elicit and assess perspectives of hip hop culture and discourse on rap music. This dissertation provides context for the research question "How does hip hop serve as a tool for political discourse?" While hip hop provides an outlet for cultural expression on many levels contributing to fashion, art, music and politics, this study focused on the political elements including race, language and advocacy. Hip hop culture deals with where marginalized citizens find themselves routinely – a place of struggle. Music is one way to express discontent with government leadership and policy. Some rap artists use this art form to express their discontent for urban decay and underclass existence.

Regarding the research question "What events in popular culture helped fuel debate regarding race, black politics, and the use of racist, sexist language?" My research identified four social situations that contributed to national contemporary discourse in hip hop in the early 21st century:

(1) The federal government's (specifically President George W. Bush and FEMA) slow response to Hurricane Katrina victims mainly in New Orleans.

(2) Hip hop's response to radio shock jock Don Imus' racist language toward the mainly black female basketball team at Rutgers University. He referred to them as "nappy headed hos."

(3) The development of a national nonprofit organization by non-rapper and hip hop music mogul Russell Simmons to push a political agenda for social justice issues in hip hop culture.

(4) Hip hop culture and political involvement in the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections.

These four issues helped solidify hip hop's political orientation regarding marginal groups in American culture and positions hip hop as an entertainment movement with a pattern of collective action that focuses on social justice issues. In contextualizing the four social events mentioned in this study, these events create strategies of engagement which demonstrate some level of "collective action" but doesn't translate into effective transformation in communities where people act upon their beliefs, generating a social movement that reaches across racial lines to the masses that in turn transforms society as a whole. According to sociologist Aldon Morris (1999) social movements require "favorable social conditions play an important role in creating circumstances conducive to protest" (p. 522). Morris suggests that "oppressed groups are not always in a position to generate change through social protest" (p. 522). Such is the case for hip hop. The social conditions that could inspire social movement in hip hop culture have not been presented in a way that radicalizes people. For instance, a fourteen-year-old black boy named Emmett Till from Chicago was lynched in August 1955 in Money, Mississippi for "whistling at a white woman" (Whitefield, 1988). The brutal crime and the exoneration of Till's murderers by an all-white jury was a precursor to the civil rights movement. Morris (1999) notes that "the widespread attention this lynching received, the brutality and raw racism of the Jim Crow regime were placed on a national stage where it was debated and denounced" (p. 521). These developments contributed to what social movement scholars deem a "political opportunity structure" (McAdam, 1982; Tarrow 1994). Morris (1999) points out that protest against racial inequality lasted for many years and for nearly two decades the civil rights movement "perfected the art of social protest...making use of trial and error" (p. 524).

I argue that hip hop lacks organizational structure globally to ignite social mobilization to generate, sustain and energize masses of people to reach one specific goal. Because so many social issues are addressed in hip hop culture, it takes more than the financial backing and organizational support of one well-organized hip hop organization like Hip Hop Summit Action Network (run by music mogul and icon Russell Simmons) to articulate contemporary struggles of minority groups. This is not to discount his efforts and successes through HSAN. It demonstrates that non-rappers like Russell Simmons have more than one agenda. He has a vested capitalist interest in hip hop. First, the social ills and injustices he addresses through his activist efforts and the young people he works to politically influence are part of the same consumer-driven, bling-obsessed youth audience that purchase his designer clothes and the music he produces, and they seek lavish lifestyles that hip hop perpetuates. Second, hip hop is generational and I believe there is a constant battle within the genre itself. For instance, there are different categories of hip hop music such as pop rap, gangsta rap, political rap and regionally-based rap (East Coast versus West Coast, and now Southern-based rap), each competing for its cultural place in hip hop history. In addition, hip hop changes as each generation evolves. Those that grew up in the early days of rap have a real appreciation for the time when beats and rhymes were the driving force in hip hop culture. Another generation may relate to the socio-political genre that introduced the world to urban decay and social injustices. Another generation may be drawn to the pop rap genre (The Fresh Prince and LL Cool J), while others are drawn to the hardcore genre that exploits women and materialism. Dyson (1996) postulates that rap music's conflicts

are "drawn from the conflict and contradictions of black urban life" (p. 7). He explains that blacks are divided by many issues that are addressed in rap music. He states,

> [rap music] draws attention to the severe economic barriers that increasingly divide ghetto poor blacks from middle- and upper-middle-class blacks. Rap reflects the intraracial class division that has plagued African-American communities for the last thirty years. The increasing social isolation, economic hardship, political demoralization, and cultural exploitation endured by most ghetto poor communities in the past few decades have given rise to a form of musical expression that captures the terms of ghetto poor existence. (p. 7)

Hip hop serves as the place where young blacks and other diverse youth groups believe the American dream can be realized. Yet, it can also be anti-American due to its anti-establishment rhetoric. It shows the conflicts of black culture and the possibilities of living in a material culture. Hip hop is the place where youth can connect to something familiar and fantasy at the same time. It exploits women and condones materialism. It educates and empowers and it challenges oppressive systems. As Dyson (1996) points out,

> It is difficult for a culture that is serious about the maintenance of social arrangements, economic conditions, and political choices that create and reproduce poverty, racism, sexism, classism, and violence to display a significant appreciation for musical expressions that contest the existence of such problems in black and Latino communities. (p. 7)

Hip hop's revolutionary potential is seen mainly in the *conscious* rap genre. *Conscious* rappers are political and so is hip hop. When hip hop artists such as Sean

"Diddy" Combs created the "Vote or Die!" campaign in 2004 to influence young people to vote or when conscious rapper Common endorsed black presidential nominee Barack Obama on the candidate's Web site, these actions are part of what hip hop considers a "movement." Yet, when it comes to political issues, hip hop culture offers no long-term solutions to urban decay or social injustice. There is no radicalized black liberation struggle as evidenced in social movements of the past. There has not been enough radical change in hip hop to change worldviews of the negativity associated with hip hop, or to revolutionize this country's politics to erase poverty from our cultural landscape, end systemic racism and sexism or erase racist language from American culture. There is no doubt that hip hop been the place where the marginalized citizens are represented, particularly since "the sign of blackness in much of this cultural marketplace is synonymous with that of the underclass" (hooks, 1994, p. 147). It provides a forum where activists seek to end racist exploitation and oppression of minorities and a place to promote self determination. It also provides a place of identification and representation for many blacks and other minority groups.

I view hip hop as a work in progress with revolutionary potential. I believe hip hop's political potential has not been realized because it is a multi-faceted culture with many "larger structures of domination [sexism, racism, class elitism]" that suggest the values of dominant culture are "hierarchally placed to maintain and perpetuate the values that uphold these exploitative and oppressive systems" (hooks, 1994, p. 117).

My research findings suggest that hip hop is a multi-faceted cultural phenomenon that sometimes pushes a political agenda, uses rap music to communicate rage and contest despair, as well as expresses social creativity. This study shows that for grassroots

organizations, hip hop serves as a catalyst for societal concerns and empowerment. As Dyson (1996) poignantly notes, "Rap has also retrieved historic black ideas, movements, and figures in combating the racial amnesia that threatens to relegate the achievements of the black past to the ash heap of dismemory. Such actions have brought a renewed sense of historical pride to the young black minds that provides a solid base for racial self-esteem" (p. 12).

In this study I found that no single monolithic issue has been identified in hip hop culture, which leads to my findings on answering the research question "To what extent does hip hop constitute a traditional social movement?" I found that the term "movement" is relative to the culture and context with which it is associated, and movement-specific ideology or set of beliefs are shared by groups. Movement culture includes shared values, language, traditions and other forms of group identification that determines the precise moment to mobilize and respond to social issues. A problematic issue is that hip hop is contradictory and not clearly defined socially or politically. I argue that hip hop's contradictions move back and forth between social constructs of materialism, capitalism and politics. Hip hop's so-called social movement leaves room for academic examination. I argue that traditional social movements have key elements that are absent in hip hop culture. For instance, there is no one monolithic issue identified; there is no specific place to go for information on advocating for national policy issues; there is not an identifiable leader to serve as the official "voice" representative of minority groups. Also, social movements are cyclical and have the ability to mobilize and require massive, organized people resources. While we can appreciate the tremendous contributions many organizations have made on behalf of hip

hop, the absence of these social movement characteristics is why hip hop has not triggered a paradigmatic shift in the field of social movements and collective action like successful movements of the past such as the civil rights movement of the 1950s.

In conclusion, I came across this quote from bell hooks that sums up the revolutionary/radical and political stance that is a defining characteristic found in *conscious* rap. In terms of hip hop serving as a social movement in popular culture with focus on the poor and powerless, the following quote from bell hooks (1994) appropriately epitomizes what it would take to address the social and often political needs of marginalized citizens:

> To change the devastating impact of poverty on the lives of masses of folks in our society we must change the way resources and wealth are distributed. But we must also change the way the poor are represented. Since many folks will be poor for a long time before those changes are put in place that address their economic needs, it is crucial to construct habits of seeing and being that restore an oppositional value system affirming that one can live a life of dignity and integrity in the midst of poverty. (p. 170)

Implications for Future Study

Despite the study's positive results, a few weaknesses are identified. First, this project was limited to a short time period and sampling, but was trying to identify important representations of broader issues specifically at the turn of the millennium. Also, there could have been a broader discussion of the history of hip hop, particularly since the genre encompasses many cultural elements outside the music scene.

Broader social critiques of hip hop by cultural scholars and public intellectuals, helped clarify where the genre fits into intellectual discourse (Boyd, 2002; Dyson, 1996, 2001, 2007; hooks, 1981, 1994; George, 1996). Beyond the immediate results of this study is its contribution to African American, cultural and media studies and popular culture as it strives to uncover the cultural implications of *conscious* rap music to hip hop's role in raising the level of political consciousness among African American youth. This study also contributes to creating discourse about *conscious* rap music and the "organic intellectual" or modern-day "Griots" and its cultural connections to historical music art forms such as blues, jazz, slave narratives and Negro spirituals. Moreover, this study shed new light on areas that have not been explored in hip hop such as hip hop's role in the practice of democracy or an optimistic view of the genre. In addition, this study broadens the discourse and creates opportunity to expand on rap music pedagogy in the field of communication.

Accordingly, this study may be useful for future projects. For instance, a media researcher could develop a quantitative analysis to determine the impact of hip hop's role in the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections and whether there was an increase in voting among ages 18-35 due to overt activist promotional campaign efforts from various grassroots, nonprofit organizations. This would give legitimacy to hip hop's cultural impact or influence on youth across racial lines as it relates to actually casting votes versus becoming a registered voter.

Rap music's significance to African American music forms has been well established. Rap music as a powerful communicative medium raises questions, causes controversy, transforms people and serves as a contemporary voice of the marginalized

citizen. Knowing this, I believe that rap music is powerful, but its real power has yet to be determined. What we know is that older artists such as Afrikka Bambaataa and Grand Master Flash, who represent the earlier generation of protest rap music, provide historical context of rap music and its political stance. The next generation of protest rappers such as Public Enemy and N.W.A. (Niggaz Wit Attitudes) provide a more militant delivery of message music with an anti-establishment ideology. The latest resurgence in the subgenre of hip hop, known as the *conscious* rappers of the early 21st century, provide insight into the future of rap as political music that seeks justice and challenges authority by any means necessary. As an entertainment movement various themes can be revealed outside the common themes of misogyny, materialism, sexism, racism and violence in rap music in general. In an effort to textually analyze lyrics of songs by black *conscious* rappers, who are socially and politically conscious, and to unveil ideological hegemony within hip hop culture, this project critiqued cultural products (songs as text) and ideologies of the *conscious* rapper. Additional research to determine the role hegemony plays in the capitalistic culture of the music industry and the dissemination of black message music would be useful in the field of media and cultural studies. As stated in Chapter Four, the encounters between black music and black politics provide context of intellectual and cultural dialogue in hip hop culture, particularly with its prominence as a commodified and commercialized art form.

Overall, this study contributes to contemporary discourse and offers insight into black popular culture where the political realm is brought into public intellectual discourse regarding a music genre and the political power it possibly holds. Hip hop has provided scholars with theoretical puzzles that push hip hop forward in academia as an

area ripe for discovery. My dissertation is a testament to the kind of research that is possible through the use of critical, cultural studies. Of question is whether the politicization of hip hop can help make a drastic enough social impact that could radically change the world.

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